

On Setting Your Friends Up

A summary of thoughts on community involvement in dating and pre-married life

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Introduction

Upon moving from Texas to Illinois, I started working in an office with a Korean woman that is a few years older than I, and that had recently married a German man. From early on in our relationship, she showed great interest in my personal love life. Her inquiries and efforts to set me up got me thinking about why certain people care so deeply about setting their friends up on dates and why others seem to not care at all. In fact, most people seem to fall into two categories: those who try to set their friends up, and those who don't. My Korean co-worker falls into the first of these categories.

I have other friends in Chicago who fall into the second category. They prefer to let nature run its course in my love life. I don't blame them because I tend to do the same with my friends. I assume that my friends are able to start relationships on their own and I trust that if they want my feedback or input they will ask for it. For some reason, getting involved in other people's dating lives just feels like meddling.

Two Categories

Before moving on, let me define what I mean by "setting up." Simply put, to set someone up is to bring two people into contact (who would not meet on their own) for the purpose of exploring a potential romantic relationship. This can be done in any number of ways. For example, one can provide opportunities for two people to meet casually in a group setting. Another way for two people to be set up is to arrange a blind date for the two people to go on. Yet another way of setting up someone is to give them the phone number of someone that you think they should call and get to know.

When it comes to setting up friends, it is my observation that married people or those who are seriously dating are the ones who are most able to and most interested in helping along the love lives their friends. The reasons for this may be that (1) these people tend to have a wider circle of acquaintances and friends from both genders, (2) these people have tasted the goodness of couple life and want to share it with others and (3) these people desire to spend more time with their single friends, but are hindered because of barriers between couples and singles.

One of the main hindrances to single people setting up their friends is that the people they know well tend to be the same gender as they are. In other words, if John wants to set up Joe, one difficulty is that most of the people that John knows well are other men. Assuming that Joe is interested in dating a woman, this becomes a problem. Due to the personal nature of the subject, people usually only talk to close friends about what they are looking for in a mate and whether or not they are interested in dating and being set up. For many people, though, it can be hard – if not impossible – to be that good of friends with someone of the opposite sex.

However, when you are in a serious relationship with someone of the opposite sex, you gain a whole new world of friends and acquaintances that are mostly of the opposite sex. Once you

begin to meet your significant other's friends, you and your partner may see possible matches for your same sex friends that you would not know of otherwise. "Two heads are better than one," and this is definitely true in matchmaking as two people with two sets of friends and two sets of eyes can see more possibilities than single people can by themselves.

Secondly, people who are single tend to enjoy single life, as that is the stage of life that they are in. Single people are fond of saying things like, "I'm not tied down by a spouse. I have the freedom to do whatever I want." Their heroes are people like Joan of Arc, Henry David Thoreau, the Apostle Paul, Mother Theresa and other wonderful single people who gave their lives to a higher purpose than earthly pleasure.

Those who are in a serious relationship however see the great benefits of couple life. They relish the intimacy of sharing with someone else their deepest secrets, hurts and joys. They have been challenged by their significant other to grow in areas that they had not realized were weak. They have seen the power of teamwork in life, of having a comforter, encourager, lover and friend always close-by. Naturally, people who have experienced these wonderful things would wish that for their single friends.

Third, people who are dating or married may be motivated to set up their single friends because they want to spend more time with them. Barriers between single people and married people naturally arise because of differences in life stage and responsibilities. For example, single people cannot relate with issues like planning a wedding, going on a honeymoon, merging two lives, raising children, etc. Likewise, most married people cannot relate to the plight of single people who would like to get married, who can't find the right person, who are ostracized for their singleness and who are constantly pressured to hurry up and get married.

Consequently, if a married person wants to maintain a deep friendship with a single person, it becomes increasingly necessary to bring that single person out of singleness and into the world of married people. On the other hand, single people may choose not to set up their single friends because they know that once their friend is in a serious relationship, they will not be as accessible as when they were single, nor will they be as committed to their friendship (since naturally the new significant other will gradually become more significant than the older friend). I doubt that many single people make this choice consciously, but it may influence their decisions at a subconscious level.

Another reason why single people don't set each other up is because they are too busy finding their own soul-mate to be looking around for their friends. Perhaps one must prove their ability to set themselves up in a successful relationship before one tries to do so for someone else.

Interestingly, parents also fall into two categories when it comes to setting their kids up. Either they work very hard to set them up, or they take a hands-off approach and let their kids find someone on their own. In my experience, the difference usually lies along cultural lines. Peter Cha and Susan Cho Van Riesen write, "In most families from Confucian-based [i.e. Asian] cultures, the final responsibility of a parent is to marry their child to a good spouse with good credentials and [a good] family. Unlike Western culture, Asian culture sees the process of marriage as a very communal endeavor" (p. 87, [Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents](#); IVP, 1998).

In general, Western culture focuses more on the individual and values their autonomy when making personal decisions. Most parents in Western culture exert less influence on their children's personal lives (and their dating lives) once they turn 18 or 21. Thus, the high

involvement level and influence of Asian parents in their children's love lives would probably feel very foreign to someone from a western cultural background.

The difference between a Christian and non-Christian approach to dating may cause Christians to be less interested in setting their friends up than their non-Christian counterparts. First of all, Christians believe that some people may be called by God to be single for their whole lives, and for those that God does call to get married, He will provide a husband or wife when the time is right. Because of this way of thinking, many Christians do not feel a need to set up their friends. They trust that if God wants two people to be together, He can and will bring them together with or without their help.

Christians also tend to be less open to casual dating than non-Christians. Some are taught at church and in Christian books that dating is fraught with problems and should be replaced with a more commitment-based approach to meeting people and falling in love (often called "courtship"). "The new attitude [on dating] recognizes that if two people can't make a commitment to each other, they don't have any business pursuing romance" (p. 47, Harris, [I Kissed Dating Goodbye](#); Multnomah Books, 1997). Because of their need for commitment and their bias against casual dating, it can be particularly challenging for many Christians to be set up on blind dates.

Non-Christians, however, are more willing to take a chance on casual dating. Dating is not seen as having to lead to marriage, but can be a fun way for two people to get to know each other. Logically, once all of the options are exhausted of people you run into in the course of your normal, everyday life, it seems inevitable and natural to get to know new people by going on dates (blind or otherwise) that require no expectation of long term commitment. Less expectation means that there is less chance of being disappointed in the relationship. Therefore, it makes total sense for people who want to be in a significant relationship to get to know someone of the opposite sex by going on casual dates that are set up by mutual friends.

Perhaps the most important reason why people do or do not set up other people is because of their feelings about being set up themselves. Someone who would never want to be set up would never think to set up their friends. For them the thought of being set up instantly brings to mind awkwardness, embarrassment, hurt feelings, high pressure situations, disappointment and unwanted meddling in the private lives of others.

On the other hand, for some people the thought of being set up is exciting and intriguing, or at least a necessary evil. Perhaps they are the people in the world who are more prone to taking risks. Maybe they want to get married and they are at a stage of life where they realize that playing it safe and waiting to meet someone "naturally" may jeopardize their chances of getting married. Generally, the older you get, the more willing you are to take the risks inherent with being set up.

The important thing is to realize that not everyone approaches the prospect of being set up the same way and that no particular way is necessarily right or better, but each has something important to teach the other. Those eager to take the risk can learn caution and patience and those who avoid risk can learn about the high rewards that come only to those who are willing to take risks.

Biblical Roots

The Bible may not give an explicit command such as “Thou shall set thy friends up on dates,” but it does speak to the blessing of God on singleness, the blessing of marriage and the involvement of the community in all aspects of one’s life.

First, God is greatly pleased with singleness. “It is good for a man not to marry,” says Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, a chapter of the Bible that has had a significant impact on my life. He goes on to write, “I would like you to be free of concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs – how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – and his interests are divided.... I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord” (vv. 32-35).

There are many blessings in being single, not least of which is the chance to have a completely undivided devotion to the Lord. Therefore, we should not think that God wants us to deliver our friends out of the terrible condition of singleness as quickly as possible. Marriage is not the end all goal of life. According to the Bible, loving God should be.

From other parts of the Bible, though, we read that marriage is a gift from God and that the partnership of a spouse is a wonderful blessing. If God said about Adam, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18), He is probably saying that about us as well. There are many areas where we are weak and could use the help of a soul-mate. Adam did not frown on the fact that God provided him with a “helper,” but instead saw immediately how good and gracious God was to give him this gift (Genesis 2:23).

The Bible also has several examples of people that God used to set up other people. In Genesis 24, Isaac was set up to meet Rebekah thanks to the community involvement of his father and his father’s extended family. Abraham made his servant swear to find a wife for his son from among his own people, and after a long journey and heartfelt prayer for God’s help the servant came across the perfect woman for Isaac, and brought her back to marry him. Another Biblical example is the way that Ruth had community help from her mother-in-law as she developed her relationship with Boaz (Ruth 3).

The point is that not all marriages happen by what we would call today the “natural” way. Some do start out with a man and woman meeting “naturally” in the course of “normal” life, and falling in love on their own without any community involvement in their relationship. On the other hand, many relationships are the result of mutual friends introducing two people they think would be good together. It seems to me that many Christians today avoid getting involved in their friends’ dating lives. But why should we resist the involvement of community in our love lives, when the God of the Bible continually uses community to impact the rest of our lives as He has used it to impact all of human history?

Community is the primary avenue for people to learn the values of Christ, to experience the love of Christ and to be the body of Christ on earth. God uses community and desires us to live in community because He Himself lives and works in community at all times. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit form a powerful, living community that operates in total unity and synchronicity. God created community for Adam by giving him Eve. God builds up the community of Israel to be His chosen people, through whom He plans to bless the whole world (Genesis 12:2). Jesus develops a community of disciples that will be God’s primary instrument for spreading the good news that He came into the world to die for our sins. Paul traveled around

the world forming communities of believers everywhere he went, and in his travels he was usually accompanied by a small group of friends and ministry partners.

God is in the business of forming and using community to influence our lives. It is only in community that people get hurt and forgiveness can be extended. It is only in community that one can love his neighbor as himself (Matthew 11:37). “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). God uses other people to sharpen us, to encourage us, to spur us on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).

Why is it then that some people think that it is more natural to find a significant other in isolation than by community involvement? Why do I sometimes think that it is preferable for my close friends to meet people I’ve never met and fall in love without my being aware of it? Why shouldn’t we expect to be a part of how people meet and why should we not pray for God to use us if He chooses to in the coming together of two well-matched individuals that we know?

God uses community to bless us in so many other ways, we should expect that God would use community to help bring two people together who may not meet or pursue a relationship with each other on their own. The problem is that we don’t give ourselves enough credit for knowing our friends and what they need. We sell ourselves short on the role we can and should play (by God’s design) in our friends’ lives. If God can use a donkey to speak to people (Numbers 22:30), surely He can and might use us.

Let us use the knowledge we have built up about our friends as we pray for them to experience all the blessings that God intends for them to have. He doesn’t have to use us, but He might choose to use us, and if He does we should be honored and grateful, and we should not second guess God’s will and choice in us to play the role of matchmaker. Of course we should not assume that God’s plan is for our friends to get married, but neither should we assume that His plan is for them to stay single for the rest of their lives.

The Risks

To be sure, there are risks involved with setting people up. Many things can go wrong and it would be unwise to rush into such an endeavor without some fear and trepidation providing a healthy sense of caution. For some people even suggesting that we might know someone that would be a good match for them might build up their hopes and expectation to the point that they would be devastated to realize that it was not going to work out. To be the cause of hurt or sin is not something that God treats lightly, even if our intentions are pure. So let us be thoughtful and prayerful as we consider the possibility of setting up other people.

Many people have been hurt by casual dating and it is my conviction that opening one’s heart to another person is a precious thing that should be done only when the commitment level is sufficiently high. One of the risks we take when setting someone up is a difference in willingness to commit. Similarly, when setting up our friends we risk unequal expectations and unequal interest in the other person, all of which can lead to disappointment, hurt and pain.

There is also the risk that the friend being set up feels like the friends setting them up are meddling or prying too deeply into their personal affairs, or that their friends chose a terrible person to be set up with. In this case, the one getting set up could get offended during the process of being set up and their relationship with the friend who did the setting up could be damaged.

Finally, as mentioned before, there is the risk of doing such a good job that you lose a friend to the world of couples and to a more significant other. This is definitely a risk that single people take when setting up other single people.

All of these risks beg the question: Why bother even trying to set someone up? The risks are high, but if the chance for success (as can only be prayerfully determined by someone who knows both people well) is high enough, the potential rewards can be tremendous. As described before, there are many incredible blessings that come with a spouse or significant other.

Nonetheless, the risks must be carefully weighed and considered before being so bold as to set up a friend. Is it possible, though, to set people up, without taking all of the risks inherent with casual dating and meeting new people? Partly, it depends on the people involved. Some people are at a place in life where their imagination is set off by the smallest spark of a possible future spouse and it would be unwise to set them up. They can't help but constantly dwell on the other person, what they might be like, what to say when they meet, what kind of image to present to them, etc. Their expectations are so high that they are bound to be disappointed and/or hurt.

Other singles are able to explore the possibility of a relationship with someone else without jeopardizing the peace that they've come to with their current state in life. Perhaps these people come from backgrounds (Christian or otherwise) that taught that it was o.k. to go on a date or two with someone, that it doesn't mean you have to commit to anything.

I believe that the secret to successfully managing the risks involved with dating and being set up is a combination of the Christian and non-Christian views on dating that I mentioned earlier. Requiring commitment does reduce the risk of heart-break and reducing expectation also lowers the risk of disappointment. The best way to enter into a new relationship is with low expectations of a prosperous future with someone. But as soon as is feasible (given the level of interaction the two people maintain), the relationship should be moved to a higher level of commitment or else both should agree to not pursue a long-term future, and instead stay at the friendship/acquaintance level.

Grace: The Risk-Enabler

In all things, let us remember the law of grace: Give grace and receive grace, for we are all fallible creatures. Grace can be extended from God if we make a mistake in setting up our friends. Grace can be extended from our friends too. We need to be full of grace and forgiveness, bearing in mind that things will not go exactly as we planned because we are limited beings, not all-knowing like God. Let us who are single and have been unsuccessfully set up, be full of grace and thanks to our friends who have tried to set us up. If you have been hurt trying to set someone up, extend grace and forgiveness as the Lord has extended it to you.

Let us be prayerful and hopeful that God can use us in the lives of our friends as we humbly submit ourselves to His Lordship. In an area that some people might consider trivial or unspiritual, let us remember how significant it is to meet and fall in love with a future spouse.

Finally, let us not be ruled by fear and paralyzed by risk. "The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1) Let us trust in the Lord Jesus who is gracious and loving and in all circumstances lean on the One who is the ultimate Matchmaker.

Some Practical Suggestions

1. Pray for your friends in whatever stage of life they are in.
 - a. If they are single, pray that God would make them content with being single and that they would be fully devoted to knowing and following Him.
 - b. If they are married, pray that God would bless them in their partnership, filling them with love and humility, and giving them a single-minded devotion to Himself.
2. Pray that God might use you to influence your friends' lives.
 - a. If they are single, pray that if there is someone you know that would be a good match for them, that God would bring them together using you if He wants to.
 - b. If they are married, pray that God might use you to spur them on to love and good deeds, constantly encouraging them to grow more in love with God as they grow more in love with each other.
3. If you feel that God is leading you to set up two people you know, carefully explore the possibility with each person and find out if both people are at a place in life where they could meet with minimum expectation.
4. If you feel that they are at a good place emotionally to meet, and they are open to being set up, arrange a meeting or assist in the exchanging of phone numbers.
5. Stand back and prayerfully watch what happens. Humbly trust that God is working and doesn't need you to intervene at every step of the relationship. But if an opportunity arises where you feel that God wants you to intervene, do so humbly and gratefully.