

Letters TO A Romantic

ON DATING



SEAN PERRON
& SPENCER HARMON
Foreword by Heath Lambert

PRAISE FOR THIS BOOK

Wow! What a needed resource for single men and women. Dating can be one of the most confusing times in a single person's life, and we desperately need solid biblical guidance in this area. Thank you, Sean and Spencer, for giving us this incredibly practical and biblical book on dating. We highly recommend it!

—**Kristen Clark and Bethany Baird**, Founders, GirlDefined Ministries; Coauthors, *Girl Defined: God's Radical Design for Beauty, Femininity, and Identity*

Sean and Spencer give terrific counsel on dating. Their words are wise, fired with passion, and biblically faithful. Those who are confused and even broken by our anything-goes era will find here a gospel-shaped path to ordered love—love as God ordains it.

—**Owen Strachan**, Associate Professor of Christian Theology, Midwestern Seminary; Coauthor, *The Grand Design: Male and Female He Made Them*

Authors and friends Sean Perron and Spencer Harmon have written a most helpful book on dating. Don't let the short chapters fool you—this book is packed with biblical wisdom for a journey on which we need it most. On a topic where some might veer into sentimentality, self-help, or legalism, Perron and Harmon strike a gracious and biblical tone throughout their work.

—**Jonathan Holmes**, Pastor of Counseling, Parkside Church, Uniontown, Ohio; Author, *The Company We Keep: In Search of Biblical Friendship*

Christian men and women who are seeking to understand how to make godly decisions concerning dating need to carefully study the wisdom of this book. Far too often, little thought is given to biblical direction concerning personal decisions about dating the opposite sex. Many think that since the Bible does not mention the idea of dating it is silent about the topic, but nothing is further from the

truth. You will be surprised at the practical wisdom this book gives. We highly recommend it to you.

—**John D. and Janie L. Street**, Authors, *The Biblical Counseling Guide for Women*

If you want rock-solid biblical guidance on dating, read this book. If you want to think wisely and practically about how to handle a first date, parents, breaking up, pornography, kissing, past sexual history, or declining a date, read this book. If you want to honor Christ with your dating relationships, read this book. I can't wait to put *Letters to a Romantic: On Dating* into the hands of singles in my church!

—**Deepak Reju**, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; Author, *On Guard* and *The Pastor and Counseling*

Praise for Both *Letters to a Romantic* Books

Sean and Spencer are two old souls. They have a remarkable amount of wisdom to offer on these topics—wisdom well beyond their years. I wholeheartedly recommend anything these two godly men, exemplary husbands, and exceptional leaders have to say about how they met their wives, honored them from courtship into marriage, and now lead and love them in the way of Christ.

—**Dan DeWitt**, Director, Center for Biblical Apologetics and Public Christianity, Cedarville University; Author, *Jesus or Nothing* and *Christ or Chaos*

From romanticism, to breakups, to the issue of sexuality and single-ness, Sean and Spencer provide us with a significant, biblical word for the areas of dating and engagement. No two areas are more ignored and yet more in need of a clear, concise word from God. These biblical counselors, with rare insight and discernment, lead you through the spiritual steps that will result in healthy, God-honoring, deepening relationships.

—**Mac and Debbie Brunson**, Cohosts of “The Fixer Upper Marriage” Bible Study, First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida

Relationships require wisdom. God has given Sean and Spencer remarkable wisdom for their age. Their wisdom, seasoned with plenty of Scripture, written in the form of letters from a friend, is a recipe for real help for couples navigating dating and engagement.

—**C. J. Mahaney**, Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church,
Louisville, Kentucky

These books contain the kind of wise biblical advice an older brother or mentor would offer to a young person who is seeking to navigate the waters of romance and engagement. Their short-letter format makes them very easy (and fun) to read. Practical answers are given to the questions young people are most likely to raise.

—**Jim Newheiser**, Director of the Christian Counseling Program and Associate Professor of Practical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte; Executive Director, Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship

Letters to a Romantic: On Dating and On Engagement are wonderful guides written by two young men who have a lot of biblical wisdom. Each letter is engaging and very informative. In fact, they are so good that I have five young adults in mind to give them to. Perron and Harmon have done an exceptional job.

—**Martha Peace**, Biblical Counselor; Author, *The Excellent Wife* and *Damsels in Distress*

There's nothing easy about dating or getting engaged. I lurched through the process like most people—fearful, fumbling, and full of doubt. If only Sean and Spencer had written these books fifty years ago! But here they are just in time for you! Make a date with these books before booking a date. The Bible's advice is never dated for those who are engaged in its teachings.

—**Robert J. Morgan**, Teaching Pastor, The Donelson Fellowship, Nashville; Author, *The Strength You Need: The Twelve Great Strength Passages of the Bible*

In these two books on dating and engagement, Sean Perron and Spencer Harmon have given us a treasure trove of biblically based practical information for all unmarried Christians. I am very grateful to God for giving Sean and Spencer the desire and ability to write these two books. They contain information that I wish had been available for me to give to Christians as they thought about dating or engagement. I will certainly have them at the ready to give to Christians who need biblically based answers to the plethora of relevant issues that godly people who are thinkers will have about these topics.

—**Wayne Mack**, Director and Professor, Strengthening Ministries Training Institute; Director, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors—Africa

Sean Perron and Spencer Harmon are full of wise, gospel-centered counsel on navigating through singleness, dating, and engagement. Whatever your season of life, you will find yourself better equipped to guide others and to strengthen your own faith by reading these books.

—**Russell Moore**, President, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

Letters
TO A
Romantic

ON DATING



SEAN PERRON
& SPENCER HARMON

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P U B L I S H I N G
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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Perron, Sean, author.

Title: Letters to a romantic : on dating / Sean Perron, Spencer Harmon.

Description: Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017029922 | ISBN 9781629953045 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781629953052 (epub) | ISBN 9781629953069 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Single people--Conduct of life. | Dating (Social customs)--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Marriage--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4596.S5 P47 2017 | DDC 241/.6765--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017029922>

To Jenny:

The world is not worthy of you,
and neither am I.

—Sean

To Taylor:

The most faith-filled, loyal, and
trustworthy person I know. I love you.

—Spencer

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FOREWORD

If you are currently reading this book, you are most likely in one of the most uncomfortable relationships possible. This complicated and awkward time of life begins just before a young man and woman start to date and ends when that same couple gets engaged. This was true in my own personal experience as a young man, and I know it now as a pastor, having walked through this clumsy season with dozens of young couples—including the men who authored this book when they were in that season themselves.

Think about how uncomfortable this time of life can be. A guy notices a girl and finds her attractive, godly, funny, interesting, and normal. He is very interested in her. Then there's the girl. She notices the guy. She thinks he's godly, handsome, funny, interesting, and less socially awkward than most guys she's been around. She is very interested in him. But how should they move forward from there? Neither has any real way of knowing if the other person has the same level of interest. So the agonizing commences: nervousness permeates, the pressure weighs down, and friends get involved—with varying degrees of wisdom. And this is in ideal circumstances! Things only get more complicated when only one person is interested in

romance, when there are varying degrees of parental preference regarding the relationship, when friends disagree over whether the relationship is a good idea, and when there is disagreement on how the relationship should be defined (is this dating, courting, talking, pursuing a closer relationship, seeing each other, or just getting to know each other a bit better?). The whole thing is maddening.

Then, every once in a while and against all odds, you catch lightning in a bottle and spend time together. But now the problems multiply. How are you to know whether the other person likes you as much as you like them? Should you hold hands? Hug? Kiss? What about how much time you spend together? How much is too much? If you're not together enough, your girlfriend (is she okay with you calling her that?) might think that you don't like her. If you're around her too much, she'll think you're a stalker. How do you know when it is appropriate to communicate your deepest feelings to this person?

Dating relationships are complicated because they come at the intersection of four realities: sin, inexperience, high stakes, and a lack of familiarity. Sin is involved because—more than we care to admit—sinful desires lie behind our decisions, motivating us to pursue relationships for all sorts of wrong reasons, including sinful sexual motivations, the desire to date someone who will raise our social status or who we believe is good looking enough for us, and countless other bad reasons. We also deal with the limitation of inexperience. Let's be honest—how much can we be expected to know about such crucial matters when we've been alive for only twenty years or so and thus legal adults for only two? The stakes are also high. Most of us understand that a dating relationship could very easily become a marriage relationship, and we do not want to mess up something so crucial. Finally, we lack familiarity with the

other person. It takes time to get to know someone well, but in this case we are making important decisions based on a relationship only a few days or weeks old.

To get beyond these problems we need wisdom. That is why I am so thrilled about this book, for it is written by two men whom God has graced with great wisdom. Sean Perron and Spencer Harmon are two of my favorite men in the world. I have known them for years as a professor, boss, pastor, and friend and have walked with them through their respective dating relationships, engagements, and marriages (I have great stories that you should ask me about sometime!). I have seen these men receive God's grace as they walked through their own dating relationships, and I have seen them communicate this wisdom to others. I'm glad that they can share their wisdom with you in the pages of this book. You need to learn from what God has shown these guys.

As I write these words, I can hear my wife, Lauren, downstairs. Almost fifteen years ago I began to pursue her (that is what we decided to call it back then). By our second date, about eight days after we had become "official," I knew that I wanted to marry her. I had never felt that way before, and I wasn't sure what to do with the desire. I decided (wisely) to withhold communicating this until a later time. As I always tell people, our dating relationship involved me waiting for the right time to tell her what I knew I wanted to say two weeks after we started dating. There were days and weeks of struggle in that waiting. There were times when I was sure I was more interested in her than she was in me. I wondered if our relationship would survive when I moved away to seminary. For a time I even wondered whether her parents would allow her to marry a guy who they knew would move her away. But we made it.

As of last month she has had my last name for thirteen years.

Foreword

As I've listened to her downstairs for the last few minutes, I have heard her singing "Crown Him with Many Crowns," laughing with our kids, calling our dog into the house, and correcting one of our sons who was sinning against our daughter. When our journey together began, a decade and a half ago, I had no idea that it would produce this much joy. But God was kind. I want you to know that he will be kind to you as well.

Trust God to give you his wisdom. And then pray for it—God promises to give wisdom when we request it in faith (see James 1:5). Then turn the page and begin reading *Letters to a Romantic: On Dating*. You will find that, as you do, God will begin to answer your prayer.

Heath Lambert
Jacksonville, FL
August 2016

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO THINK ABOUT DATING (AND THIS BOOK)

Sean and Spencer

Dear Reader,

You are about to read a collection of letters covering a wide range of topics related to dating and romance. We have written these letters to you because we are convinced that God cares about you and your relationships. These letters are not designed to argue a particular dating method or give a play-by-play of “courtship.” Instead, our goal is to demonstrate how the Bible gives meaningful and practical advice when it comes to pursuing romance.

We are convinced that our God is a worthy God. We believe that Jesus deserves all the glory that this world can possibly produce. This means that Jesus wants you to bring him honor and fame in every possible scenario you may encounter in your romantic relationships. We are also convinced that people are happiest when they seek to bring Jesus glory and that they were

created to experience the joy of living for the majesty of God.¹ The foundation for our book can be narrowed down to three truths:

1. God deserves glory from everything—including romance (see Col. 1:16).
2. We experience true happiness when we seek to glorify God in everything—including romance (see 1 Cor. 10:31).
3. In the Bible, God tells everything we need to know to enable us to bring him glory and us joy—and this includes our romance (2 Peter 1:3).

We are not relational gurus. Quite the opposite—we would be the first to admit to you that when we follow our own wisdom we get lost. We are sinners desperately in need of God’s illuminating Word in every facet of our lives. We have made mistakes, we have regrets, and we need wisdom and grace from God and others. Yet, despite our shortcomings, we have come to see that the Bible has essential, important, and practical things to say about romance.

The letters you will read are arranged so that they build on each other, but they can be read in any order. Each chapter is designed to be short and practical but not comprehensive. Even though we don’t know the specifics of your situation, we have made a concerted effort to make the chapters as relevant as possible. It is our prayer that this content will be immediately helpful and tangible rather than overly narrow or rigid.

1. Our thoughts have been shaped and influenced by John Piper’s book *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011). For further reading on this topic, check out Piper’s short book *The Dangerous Duty of Delight: Daring to Make God Your Greatest Desire* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001).

Our wives, Jenny Perron and Taylor Harmon, have also contributed to many of the letters and have provided their own warm touches throughout.

Use this book in whichever way best serves you and your relationship. Skip around, read it alone, or go through it as a couple or with a group of friends. There are questions at the end of each chapter to help you think through the content in a personal way. The point of this book is to start a conversation, not to have the whole conversation for you. Also, before you dive into this book, it might be helpful to identify several older, more mature Christians who can talk through these issues with you.

Whether you are struggling with singleness, enduring a breakup, beginning a new relationship, or making the final step toward engagement, we believe it is the pursuit of Christ *through his Word* that will allow you to address *any* dating issue with confidence. We have prayed this for you and hope that you will see and cherish this theme as you read.

Until then,
Sean and Spencer



MARRIAGE VS. SINGLENESS

Sean and Jenny

Dear Romantic,

Romance is a wonderful gift from God. Rightly understood, it is full of passion, commitment, risk, and adventure. It is an incredible journey that originates with God. From the very beginning, God designed everyone to be in love with him. He longs for this so intensely that, while we were still sinners, God sent his son Jesus to die for us (see Rom. 5:8). God took on human flesh and suffered the excruciating pain of the cross so that the world could have a relationship with him (see John 3:16).

God desires everyone to know and become addicted to his steadfast love (see Psalm 63:3). This divine romance is available for everyone who believes in Jesus Christ and receives forgiveness for sin. Yet, while God wants everyone to experience his love, he doesn't want everyone to fall in love with another person. Some will fall in love and get married, but the Bible teaches that some will not.

The apostle Paul encourages people, in 1 Corinthians 7, to

Marriage vs. Singleness

remain single for the sake of the gospel. Singleness is actually *best*, according to Paul. He commends singleness because of the benefits it holds for the kingdom of God. “The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided” (1 Cor. 7:32–34). There are some people who are so captivated by the romance of God that they intend to stay single for life. Marriage is a distraction to them. But how can you tell whether you should or should not stay single for life?

Marriage and singleness each have their own unique ways of displaying the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the Bible describes both singleness and marriage as gifts from God.

Notice these gifts in 1 Corinthians 7:6–7:

Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has *his own gift* from God, one of one kind and one of another.

A gift is a good thing. James says that every good and perfect gift comes down from above from the Father of lights (see James 1:17). God never gives bad gifts to his children. Every Christian contemplating whether or not to pursue an earthly romance should ask, “Do I have the gift of singleness or the gift of marriage?”

HOW TO KNOW IF YOU HAVE THE GIFT OF SINGLENES

Paul answers this question in 1 Corinthians 7:9: “But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” If you have the gift of

singleness, you won't be continually burning with passion for a spouse. You are pleased without parenthood and satisfied without sex. Your mind is currently occupied with the work of the gospel, and the desire for sex rarely crosses your mind. If this describes you, you likely have the gift of singleness, even if just for this season of life.

Here is one example that may help you as you think through this issue. Jenny and I had a close friend who served with me in our church. He was always one of the first church members to volunteer whenever a need arose. One day it dawned on me that I had never heard him express romantic interest in a girl. He was in his late twenties and was a godly man, a true gentleman. The majority of his friends were in dating relationships or were newly married.

So I asked him whether he was interested in pursuing anyone for marriage. He confessed that he didn't spend time thinking about marriage or dating. He was not consumed with lust, and rarely did he think about sex unless someone else brought up the topic. He wasn't interested in any girls romantically, preferring instead to spend this season of his life investing in his local church.

Nothing was wrong with him. Nothing needed to be fixed. He didn't obsess over whether or not he was missing out on God's will for his life. He wasn't introspective or consumed with whether he had the gift of singleness or marriage. He was simply passionate about serving his church—not burning with passion for a spouse. He had the gift of singleness.

If you have the gift of singleness, seize it for the glory of God. Take life by the horns, risks and all. Launch into the fray of ministry with abandonment. Invest in others without restriction or reservation. The single person doesn't have to worry about buying a one-way ticket to the nations to spread the

good news of Jesus. Single people can serve faithfully in their churches, welcome people into their homes, visit orphans, feed the hungry, excel in their workplaces, and share the gospel.

HOW TO KNOW IF YOU HAVE THE GIFT OF MARRIAGE

But what if you do desire a spouse? What if you long to have a family and to love someone exclusively without reserve? This might mean that marriage is for you.

On the surface, singleness may look more holy, but marriage is not for those who are unable to board the radical boat or are left behind on the unspiritual dock. Marriage is not for the less godly or for those with less gusto for the gospel. No, marriage is also for those who are zealous about God.

God designed marriage to display his glory in a unique way. If you have the gift of marriage, don't bail because you feel less spiritual. Marriage involves taking someone by the hand and serving with that person until the very end. It means taking up a job, having kids, loving others wholeheartedly, adopting the orphan, feeding your neighbor, showing hospitality, serving in your church, working hard for your employer, and telling others about Christ.

Once you figure out what gift you have, work toward using it. If you know that you want to pursue marriage in the future, go ahead and take steps toward that end. For instance, instead of backpacking across Europe, take a cooking class or develop your skills in a trade. Learn to provide for your future household.

Whatever you do, don't buy the lie of "Twenty Things You Have to Do in Your Twenties before Marriage." Blog posts like these are everywhere, and they treat marriage like a killjoy. Don't be duped into thinking that you have to "live it up before you

Marriage vs. Singleness

settle down.” Marriage isn’t a drag. There is nothing wrong with a bucket list, but don’t waste your life by making everything about you. And if you really want to take that backpacking trip, who says you can’t do it with your spouse?

“He who finds a wife finds a good thing” (Prov. 18:22). At the same time, he who chooses the single life lives well. The point of 1 Corinthians 7 is to be faithful to what you are called. Live each season putting God first in your heart. Advance the kingdom of Jesus according to the desires God has given you and the circumstances he has placed you in—even if they are not what you expected. If your heart longs for a spouse and the Lord provides one, it is no sin to marry. Receive that gift; do not reject it.

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. (1 Timothy 4:4–5)

Whether your gift is singleness or marriage, purpose now to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (see Mark 12:30). Lose yourself in this divine romance.

Until then,
Sean and Jenny

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe that you have the gift of singleness or the gift of marriage?
2. Do trusted friends and church members believe that you have the gift of singleness or of marriage? Have you asked them?

Marriage vs. Singleness

3. How often does the desire for marriage and sex cross your mind?
4. Does seeing others begin a relationship make you long for one too? If so, why?
5. What is one practical way you can begin cultivating your gift in order to serve others?



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ACBC has grown from a handful of individuals to thousands of certified counselors all around the world. Now in our fourth decade of pursuing excellence in biblical counseling, we have had five executive directors: Dr. Bob Smith, Dr. Howard Eyrich, Rev. Bill Goode, and Rev. Randy Patten. Dr. Heath Lambert became the fifth executive director in 2013.

Every Christian is called to speak the truth in love to one another. ACBC trains Christians in their gospel responsibility to be disciple-makers and to build up the body of Christ. This training is accomplished through conferences and events throughout the world.

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“A treasure trove of biblically based practical information.” —**WAYNE MACK**

“Make a date with these books before booking a date.” —**ROBERT J. MORGAN**

“Perron and Harmon have done an exceptional job.” —**MARTHA PEACE**

Dear Romantic,

It’s no secret that this stage of life is a tough one! The dating process is complicated and confusing—and that’s *before* you add difficulties like how to graciously decline a date, how to guard your bodies and hearts, and how to deal with sexual sin in your past.

But we are writing you with great news! God cares about you and your relationships, and his Word shares meaningful and practical advice. Sean Perron and Spencer Harmon, along with their wives, Jenny and Taylor, have written you several letters to guide you through this season of dating—each one is short, practical, and relevant, and contains discussion questions to help you apply it even more personally.

Whether you are struggling with singleness, enduring a breakup, embarking on a new relationship, or even making the final step toward engagement, opening up these letters will help you to start some helpful, God-honoring conversations.

“Rock-solid biblical guidance on . . . how to handle a first date, parents, breaking up, pornography, kissing, past sexual history, [and] declining a date. . . . If you want to honor Christ with your dating relationships . . . read this book.”

—**DEEPAK REJU**

“Christian men and women who are seeking to understand how to make godly decisions concerning dating need to carefully study the wisdom of this book. . . . You will be surprised at the practical wisdom this book gives. We highly recommend it to you.”

—**JOHN D. STREET AND JANIE L. STREET**



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Also see  *Letters to a Romantic:
On Engagement*

DATING & ENGAGEMENT
ISBN: 978-1-62995-304-5



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