

Parent and Youth Retreat – “Talk about sex? With them?”

by Carol Duerksen

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Invite parents and youth to this retreat. Prior to the retreat, parents should purchase a small gift that they will be sharing with their son/daughter at the end of the retreat. The gift should be symbolic of a rite of passage, such as a key chain, necklace, bracelet, watch—something that can symbolize support and the relationship between parent/child/God. See Part 4 for more details.
- 2 Papers and pens
- 3 Newsprint and marker
- 4 Cards with all of the scripture passages printed on them, one per card, and one card for each participant.
- 5 Copies of the skits for participants
- 6 Copies of the article “We’ll Make ‘Em Like Us” for all participants.
- 7 Highlighters for each person.
- 8 Someone prepared to dramatically read the story “Worth Dating.”
- 9 **Optional:** Cell phones for each youth and you
- 10 **Optional:** View the video “Thirteen.” Pick clips to show to parents and teens that illustrate the influence of friends on each other.
- 11 Gold dollar coins—one for each participant.
- 12 Tell participants to each bring a dollar bill for one of the activities.

SESSION OUTLINE

PART ONE “WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?”:

- 1 Begin with an ice-breaker game. Here’s one possibility: Seat participants in a circle, with parents beside their youth. Say: “I’m going on an adventure and I’m taking my _____” and fill in the blank with an item beginning with the same letter as the first letter in the first name of the person next to you. Ex. If the person next to you is John, you could take your jump rope. Go around the circle, with each person saying what they are taking on their trip, and you saying whether or not they are allowed to take what they name. Continue until everyone has caught onto the key to this game.
- 2 Introduce the weekend with words something like this: Welcome to a weekend adventure when you will be talking about sex together. Now before you all get up and

run off, listen up. Kids, whether you want to think about it or not, your parents do know something about sex. They are sexual beings now, and they were when they were your age. Parents, your kids are also sexual beings living in a world that is quite different from the one in which you were a teenager. So ... it's time to talk about it. This weekend is a time to be open and honest with each other ... or at least to begin those conversations. Because, kids, no matter what you think, the decisions you make about sex are not made in a vacuum. They do affect more people than just you. The decisions you make affect your parents, and they may have affects on the rest of your life.

- 3 Give everyone paper and pens and let them work on this activity alone.

Tell parents to make a list of the ten things they'd like their son or daughter to know about sex. Ask youth to make a list of ten things they want their parents to do or not do in their relationship with their teen—half of those things should relate to dating and sex. No one should sign their names.

- 4 Bring the parents and students together and read the lists. Lead a discussion about the lists.
- 5 **Option:** Invite one or more parents to tell stories of their own children and how their sexual choices affected the whole family. These should NOT be parents of the teens present. They should be parents whose children are already adults, or parents of teens not in your church. The stories could involve abortion, teenage pregnancy and raising a child, early marriage. STDs, etc. The general idea is that the story tells about choices made and consequences of the choices.
- 6 **Option:** Read or tell stories you have located on the topics noted in #5.
- 7 Whether you use option #5 or #6, divide the parents and youth into separate groups and ask them to talk about the stories. What do they think when they hear the stories? How do they react when they hear the story? Make a list of the feelings that they had as they listened.
- 8 Bring the group together and compare the reactions.
- 9 Hand out the card with the I Corinthians passage on it. Read it.

I Corinthians 6:17-20, The Message

There's more to sex than mere skin on skin. Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. As written in Scripture, "The two become one." Since we want to become spiritually one with the Master, we must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever—the kind of sex that can never "become one." There is a sense in which sexual sins are different from all others. In sexual sin we violate the sacredness of our own bodies, these bodies that were made for God-given and God-modeled love, for "becoming one" with another. Or didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Don't you see that you can't live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for? The physical part of you is not some piece of property belonging to the spiritual part of you. God owns the whole

works. So let people see God in and through your body.

10 Close with this responsive reading:

Leader: So let **THOSE AROUND YOU** see God in and through your body.

Parents and youth: So let **THOSE AROUND ME** see God in and through my body.

Leader: So let those around you see **GOD** in and through your body,

Parents and youth: So let those around me see **GOD** in and through my body.

Leader: So let those around you see God in and through **YOUR BODY**.

Parents and youth: So let those around me see God in and through **MY BODY**.

Leader: Let it be with us according to your word.

Parents and youth: Let it be with us according to your word.

PART TWO “WHAT WAS GOD THINKING?”:

- 1 Begin the session with the skit “Very Good!” Before the skit, instruct students to listen for all of the things that refer to male-female relationships and the differences between guys and gals.
- 2 Discuss the male/female “issues” that came up in the skit and make a list on the newsprint. They would include:
 - a) Female thinks male can read her mind.
 - b) Male is always thinking about sex.
 - c) Female needs the emotional side of a relationship.
 - d) Male does what he needs to do to “make her happy.”
 - e) Female concerned about clothes.
 - f) Male won’t ask for directions.
 - g) They both blame each other

Discuss this list. Are these stereotypes? Do you think they are true? Can you interchange the words male and female in all of the examples?

- 3 Break into groups of males only and females only. Discuss other elements of being male and female they would add to the list. What are “male characteristics”? Female? How do these different characteristics affect how the sexes relate to each other? Come back

together in a large group and share your lists. Discuss: What was God thinking when males and females were created like they were?

- 4 Hand out the article “We’ll Make ‘Em Like Us” and a highlighter to each person. Ask them to read the article and highlight anything that they question or affirm—anything that stands out to them because they agree with it or because they wonder about it.
- 5 Bring the group back together and discuss the areas that were highlighted.
- 6 Hand out the card with the I Thess. passage on it and read it together.

One final word, friends. We ask you—urge is more like it—that you keep on doing what we told you to do to please God, not in a dogged religious plod, but in a living, spirited dance. You know the guidelines we laid out for you from the Master Jesus. God wants you to live a pure life.

Keep yourselves from sexual promiscuity.

Learn to appreciate and give dignity to your body, not abusing it, as is so common among those who know nothing of God.

Don’t run roughshod over the concerns of your brothers and sisters. Their concerns are God’s concerns, and he will take care of them. We’ve warned you about this before. God hasn’t invited us into a disorderly, unkempt life but into something holy and beautiful—as beautiful on the inside as the outside.

I Thess. 4:1-7 (The Message)

PART 3 “WHAT ARE YOUR FRIENDS THINKING?”:

- 1 Begin this session with the dramatic reading of “Worth Dating.”
- 2 After the story, separate the parents and youth into separate rooms.
 - a) The parents will spend this time discussing how they would relate to their teenager if he or she was in the position of the person in this story. Other questions for them to discuss: How do they talk to their teen about dating and sex? How much do they know about their teen’s activities? This should be a time for them to share and learn from each other. When the sharing is completed, they should spend some significant time alone or as couples, praying for their teen and their teen’s friends.
 - b) The teens will spend this time processing this article. Do they know similar stories? How did Shanika’s friends affect her decisions and what happened to her in this story? How do friends affect their decisions?
 - c) **Option:** Use cell phones to help youth think about the influence of their friends. Ask them to text message you what they think about the influence of their friends. This

will force them to put it into succinct words, and also opens up communication that may not happen verbally. They are free to offer as much or as little information as possible. Assure them that the information they give you will remain between the two of you. It will be confidential. If the student(s) is willing, you may want to follow up on what they share with you.

- d) **Option:** If you don't want to use the cell phone option, youth can write down what they think about the influence their friends have on them and hand it in. Assure them that the information they give you will remain between the two of you. It will be confidential. If the student(s) is willing, you may want to follow up on what they share with you.
- 3 **Option:** Bring parents and youth together to watch the clips you've picked from the video "Thirteen." This is a frank, rated R, at times shocking movie, so be sure to preview it. **Plot Outline:** A thirteen-year-old girl's relationship with her mother is put to the test as she discovers drugs, sex, and petty crime in the company of her cool but troubled best friend. **Plot Synopsis:** At the edge of adolescence, Tracy is a smart straight-A student—if not a little naive (it seems ... she smokes and she cuts to alleviate the emotional pain she suffers from having a broken home and hating her mom's boyfriend, Brady.) When she befriends Evie, the most popular and beautiful girl in school, Evie leads Tracy down a path of sex, drugs and petty crime (like stealing money from purses and from stores). As Tracy transforms herself and her identity, her world becomes a boiling, emotional cauldron fueled by new tensions between her and her mother, as well as teachers and old friends.
- 4 Lead a discussion about the video.
- 5 Hand out the cards with the Colossians passage on it and read it together.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

Colossians 3:15-17 (The Message)

PART 4 "THE BEST FOR YOU":

- 1 Begin the session by collecting the dollar bills from each participant. **Say:** *I appreciate you giving me this money. You don't know why, but you're doing it. You're taking a small risk. Thank you.*
- 2 Do the Zach Goes Out on a Limb skit.
- 3 **Discuss:** How did Zach go out on a limb? What did he risk? What was the result of him

taking this risk?

- 4 Share this mini-lecture—expand upon it as you wish: *Jesus saw the best in Zach, and he knew the best for him. He called it out of him. What is the best in you, and for you? What risk do you need to take to bring out the best in you and for you? Maybe it means saying no to something or someone. Maybe it means saying yes to boundaries and good choices. Maybe it means having the nerve to share your questions and thoughts with somebody. Maybe it means choosing friends that will help you make right choices yourself. Maybe it means opening up communication with your teenager. Whatever you think it might be, we ask you to think about a risk that you are willing to take—a risk that will help give you a better life both now and in the future—a risk that Jesus would like for you to take. As a symbol of the risk that you as a teen are taking, you will be receiving a gift from your parent(s)*
- 5 Allow teens and parents to find a place where they can be alone to spend a few moments opening the gift and sharing with each other.
- 6 Bring the group back together and invite teens to share what they received. **Optional:** they may share what risk they are committing to, but they may pass if they don't want to share.
- 7 Hand out the gold dollar coins to each participant. **Say something like this:** *The dollar that you gave me is coming back to you in another form. The risk you took is being rewarded with gold. Take this coin. Keep it someplace to remind you of this weekend ... what we talked about, what you learned, what you are willing to risk and change in order to be a part of God creating the best within you.*
- 8 Hand out the cards with the Jeremiah passage on it and read it together:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:11-13 NIV
- 9 Wrap up the retreat, with sharing, prayer, singing—whatever you feel works best for your group.

EAVESDROPPING ON ADAM AND EVE

Characters: God, Adam, Eve

God is off stage.

Adam: (looking around): Check this out, Eve! Pretty amazing place, huh?

Eve: No kidding! I've never seen anything so beautiful!

Adam: Well, considering you've never seen anything else before.....

Eve: Hey! Give me a break! You know what I mean.

Adam: I can't ready your mind, honey.

Eve: Well you should be able to. You're my husband.

Adam: And speaking of being your husband. . .honey. . .how about a little roll in the grass, if you know what I mean.

Eve: I know exactly what you mean, sweetheart. Is that all you ever think about?

Adam: Pretty much.

Eve sighs loudly: You know I love you, and the sex is great. I'd just like to spend a romantic evening together first before we "roll in the grass," as you say.

Adam: I guess we can do that, if it makes you happy.

Eve: Makes me happy? Doesn't it make you happy?

Adam: Oh yes! (rolls his eyes) Of course! You bet!

God speaks off stage: Hello! Anybody home?

Adam: Hello God!

God: Thought I'd stop by for a visit. Can we meet at the big trees in the middle of the park? I want to show you something.

Adam: Sure!

God: Good! See you there in about 10 minutes.

Eve: God's coming over? Oh dear, I haven't got a thing to wear.

Adam looks her up and down and chuckles: Now that's the truth.

Eve gives him a disgusted look.

Adam: Look, it doesn't matter. God's seen you naked already, remember?

Eve: Okay, okay, let's start walking. Do you remember how to get to the big trees in the middle of the park?

Adam: I think so.

Eve: What do you mean, "you think so"?

Adam: I can get us there.

Eve: Why don't we ask God for directions?

Adam: Because I know the way.

Eve: Men! If we're late, I'm telling God it's your fault.

Adam: Fine. And if you can't resist sneaking some of the great fruit on that big tree and you make me eat some too, I'm telling God it's **your** fault!

Eve: What makes you think I'd do that?

"WE'LL MAKE 'EM LIKE US"

By Brenda Martin Hurst

"I don't understand you!" Chad blurted out in frustration.

"Ditto!" responded Tracy with aggravation in her voice as she pulled away from him.

"You wear sexy shirts and I get turned on just looking at you. When our bodies touch, of course I want to go further. You go along with it so far, and then you say, 'No, Chad!' So which is it, yes or no?"

"Chad, I love to kiss you and I love the thrill I feel when our bodies are close. But I don't want to have sex. How come you can't understand that?"

Tracy and Chad have been here before—the place where they realize they think so differently and can barely understand where the other is coming from. More than once they've bumped up against the truth that they see things so differently. It happens not only when the issue is their physical relationship. Sometimes it happens when they try to pick out a movie together or when Tracy tries to talk with Chad about her relationships with her girlfriends. Guys and girls are different!

What could God possibly have been thinking when designing us male and female?

It's interesting that the Genesis 1 account of creation gives us a peek into the divine mind (or shall we say "minds"?). Check out Genesis 1:26-27 (NRSV, emphasis added): "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind [in Hebrew, *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness.' . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." The strange thing is, verse 26 refers to God as "us," and verse 27 calls God "he." Yet both verses tell us God created "*them*" (female and male) "according to our likeness" and "in the image of God." Unlike the rest of creation, God intentionally created human beings, both male and female, in the divine image.

What was God thinking? In essence, "We'll make 'em like us," said God. Whatever the diversity between girls and guys, we both reflect the image of God. Different human beings intended for relationship with one another, for communion (a common union) and, if married, intended to

become “one flesh.”

If we follow the story into verse 28, we read that God blessed *them* and told *them* to “be fruitful and multiply.” God gave *them*—male and female—the responsibility “to fill the earth and subdue it.” They share the responsibility to create children in their image and tend the creation. It was a mutual responsibility for the beings created in God’s image. There is no hint here of different roles for the male and the female.

Finally, God looked at everything God had created and exclaimed, “Indeed, it is very good!” That means God determined that creating human beings male and female in God’s image was a very good idea! Whatever differences do exist between Chad and Tracy are very good because of God’s design from the very beginning. The real trick is figuring out what male/female differences are by God’s good design and what differences we sinful human beings have created ourselves.

As if this isn’t hard enough to figure out, the book of Genesis gives us another creation account in Genesis 2—a quite different account with a different order. Specifically, the creation of male and female human beings comes in two steps: first, one human being (in Hebrew, *adam*) formed from the dust (in Hebrew, *adamah*) is created before the plants and animals. In this account no mention is made of God creating male and female in God’s image. Rather God is thinking, “This human being shouldn’t be alone. I’ll create a helper as a partner.” So God created other creatures out of the earth—animals and birds of every kind. But guess what? None of them was the right kind of partner. So finally, the story goes, God caused the human creature to fall into a deep sleep, and God did a little surgery. The original adam became two creatures—male and female. In Hebrew, adam means human not man, male, or Adam. Besides, Jesus said, “*From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female*” (Mark 10:6).

For some reason, the Genesis account adds that they “were both naked, and were not ashamed.” Imagine that! Both naked and not ashamed. A far cry from Chad and Tracy’s experience. How come?

Genesis 3 tells us something happened in the good garden God created that soured the relationship between male and female. The ideal mutual partnership became two competing individuals. As a result of their choice to sin, they turned against each other. The man blamed God for giving him a bad partner. The woman blamed the trickster God had created. They were ashamed of their nakedness and hid themselves from God. God described how things would change because of their sin. The man and woman no longer would be the partners God intended. In this world of their own making, the man ruled over the woman. This was not what God had in mind originally. This is not what God intended for male and female human beings together. The diversity, which God intended to be experienced as gift in a relationship of mutuality, became divisive in a relationship of estrangement. An up-down relationship, which God never intended, replaced the mutual partnership of helping one another that God envisioned.

What does this have to do with Chad and Tracy? Whether they know it or not, they are living with the effects of human sinfulness. They are living with a world of human making. God designed them in God’s own image, male and female, to be partners and co-creators. As a result of human sinfulness, a mutually respectful and satisfying sexual relationship turns into domination of male over female. Her desire for him becomes distorted, and he views her as a sexual object to be had.

The book found in the Bible, Song of Solomon, portrays a male/female sexual relationship that is mutual and deeply satisfying to both. Both the woman and the man desire the other and take the initiative to seek out the other. They both are attracted to the physical body of the other. Both delight in the erotic feelings that physical closeness arouse. Both express their love to the other and invite the other to experience sexual intimacy. This is a song of mutual desire, mutual joy, deep mutual love.

In this song there is no hint of being ashamed of their bodies or of their sexual desire. There is no evidence of shame because of their nakedness. While differences of their female and male bodies are named, there is no sense that one is over the other.

Back to Tracy and Chad. How come they seem to think so differently about sex? Did God intend it this way? Did God create guys to think about sex most of the time? Did God create girls to want sex less? I don't think so. Those patterns come from a world of our own making: a world that makes women into passive sex objects for men's pleasure, a world that defines men as sexual animals; a world that obscures that women are made in the image of God; a world that doesn't hold men mutually responsible for tending and keeping the children they create; a world where little boys and girls are sexually violated before they even awaken to the gift of their sexuality; a world that defines sex as the ultimate experience.

God created us for sexual relationships that are truly mutual. We were designed to attract and to be attracted to one another. We were formed with bodies that are very sensitive to touch. We were designed to seek loving human friendships of various depths, one of which is the unique intimate relationship of "one flesh." Both female and male were given sexual organs designed to give intense physical pleasure and to experience the joy of release. We were designed to leave father and mother, to cleave to one another and to create human beings in our likeness. Marriage relationships were intended to be exclusive, loving unions in which we experience together the mysterious unity of the "us" of our Creator. Our true differences as male and female were not intended to divide us. Rather, they were meant to drive home our deep need for one another in order to fully grasp the nature of our God, in whose image we both were made.

Well, what might mutual relationships look like for teenagers who are dating and discovering their God-given sexual feelings and desires?

- 1 Guys or girls can initiate a date or reveal an interest in pursuing a relationship together.
- 2 Mutual respect is the basis for all actions and physical expressions.
- 3 Both respect the boundaries of the other, and they both guard them.
- 4 Each seeks to understand the hopes and the fears of the other.
- 5 Each gives and receives physical pleasure.
- 6 They share responsibility for tending the relationship by clearly expressing themselves and attentively listening and responding to the other.
- 7 Each honors the differences they discover between them and allows the other to help them understand the opposite sex.

Jesus' guideline for all human relationships is, "Love one another." The New Testament explains that love means to honor one another, submit to one another, forgive one another, bear one another's burdens, be kind to one another, and much more. These principles can be applied specifically to girl/guy relationships too. Surely God had in mind that we help one another. Tracy and Chad share the privilege and the responsibility to help one another understand their God-given gift of sexuality. Now that's awesome!

"WORTH DATING"

A True Story by Shanika Allen*

***names have been changed**

I went into my senior year of high school full of expectations. I had a youth group that pushed me to be a better person and a better Christian. I had several really close friends. I was making good grades. But one thing had been lacking for my entire time in high school, and it was still missing: a connection with a guy.

I was determined to change that in my senior year, so I started asking. I asked two guys to prom; both graciously declined. Still I smiled, got the dress, and planned to go along with one of my friends who already had a date—a mutual friend I had introduced her to a couple months earlier.

"Just come with us," she said, and I agreed. She was my best friend, and he was someone I really enjoyed being around. He was 22 years old, and we were 16 and 17. He picked us up at her house, and he even brought me a corsage. I thought to myself, *This is probably what a real date feels like.*

That evening I found out that my friend had broken up with the guy before prom, but they agreed to go to prom together—which explained why they asked me to go along with them. Later he asked me if I would like to go out on a real date sometime. I was elated! An older guy was interested in me and found me attractive and worth dating!

He was at my house almost every evening, and the evenings he couldn't make it, he would call me. Sometimes we would fall asleep on the phone together. About a month after we started dating, he asked me if we could take our relationship to the next level, and I'm not talking about holding hands.

I told one of my friends at youth group and my best friend about it, and they gave me strength to resist. I was adamantly against having sex before marriage. My boyfriend would always tell me that he wouldn't buy a new car without test-driving it first. I always thought how funny that sounded, but usually I just laughed it off. He would back off for a while, and then suddenly he confessed that I was the one he wanted to marry. All my dreams were coming true, and I only had to date one man!

Just before my 17th birthday I gave in to his persuasion. I figured that his promises that he'd always be there with me and of a future wedding made it all right. Wrong. All I'd heard from my peers was how wonderful of a feeling it is to have sex and how you want it all the time after you do it once. Wrong again.

My first mistake was giving in to a man who just told me that I was the one he wanted. The second mistake was not asking about his history—like how many others he had slept with or if he had ever been tested for any sexually transmitted diseases. I lucked out that he had never contracted a disease from someone else, but that didn't change the pain that the first time brings: physical pain, guilt, and pain in my heart for letting myself down. I had always wanted to please my parents and be a strong Christian, and in this one life-changing moment I had let both God and my parents down.

Of course I had to tell someone, so I chose someone safe—my best friend. I got mixed feedback from her.

My boyfriend told me that if we did it more often, I would start to feel less pain and less guilt. I didn't really want to, but he was my first love, and he said he wanted to marry me. I wanted to keep him as a boyfriend because I thought no one else wanted me. Christmas was a few months away, and that was when he said he was going to give me a ring to make it official, so I made the decision to keep doing what he asked of me.

Things started to change in our relationship. We didn't go out anymore. All we did together for dates was watch movies or cable at his friend's house. Before we had started dating we found that we had become mutual friends with a couple down the road. I had been friends with the girl, and he had grown up with her husband. We would go to their house and feel right at home with them. One weekend just after my 18th birthday, I went to their house to meet up with my boyfriend.

My friend was just leaving with her mother to see a movie and asked if I would like to go along. I told her I'd already seen it and my boyfriend was expecting to meet me soon. She went ahead and left, telling me that her husband would be mowing the yard if I needed anything.

Soon after she left and I had settled in to watch their cable, her husband came into the house. He claimed he couldn't start the mower, so he'd given up on the lawn. He sat in his recliner and I sat on the couch. Soon he came to sit next to me on the couch. He was uncomfortably close, so I scooted over a little. He put his arm around me and held me down so that I couldn't scoot over any more. He told me that he could kill me just like that and make it look like I had an accident. I was scared stiff. He quickly moved me around and demonstrated his strength, which scared me even more. Then he raped me right there on the couch. As soon as he let me go, I ran to the bathroom and hit my knees. I heard him talking on the phone to someone, and he was as calm as can be.

I felt like it was entirely my fault. I asked for it. The guilt that had been with me through my first relationship was telling me that I had put myself in that situation. I decided that since it was my fault I shouldn't tell anyone. I kept this horrible secret for about five days until my mom confronted me. She said she could tell that something was terribly wrong with me. I didn't have to say much—just his name—and I was crying. She immediately called the doctor.

That evening I told my boyfriend what had happened. Those words were the hardest words I'd ever had to spit out. *Rape* is an awful word. Just hearing it or even writing it makes my skin crawl. Anyway, he must have misunderstood me and thought that I had cheated on him with his best friend. I was appalled that he would not believe me.

Our relationship started to crumble. The next day his best friend's wife called me and accused me

of cheating with her husband. I quickly set her straight, confessing all that had taken place in their house. A week later she filed for divorce. My boyfriend also decided to end our relationship about the same time. He thought I wasn't trustworthy.

I was all alone once again. My parents, my youth sponsors, and my best friend were the few people who saw me through this horrible ordeal. I prayed every hour of every day to give me strength. I felt like there was no turning back.

About a year later someone asked me out on a date. I thought it might help me feel better if I started dating again. I would have someone to talk to and share with me. I went on the first date, telling him and myself that we would not be having sex in this relationship. Soon we were together almost every night. He was nine years older than me and said he was ready to settle down with me. Finally I thought I could right this wrong and follow through with marriage. He proposed to me with a ring and everything.

We were engaged for about six months before I was baptized. That day was the most wonderful day of my life! My sins were washed away, and I became filled with the Holy Spirit. I felt free, new, and restored!

That afternoon I went to his house to tell him that I wanted to make some changes in our relationship. He told me that he didn't see a problem with the way things had been going. I disagreed. He told me that maybe we just needed some time to straighten things out and we should take a break. This time I was a stronger person. I didn't need any time to see that I was done being a deliberate sinner.

When I started dating again, I confessed my past to the guy right from the start. I really wanted this relationship to be built on the right foundation. I wanted us each to be "worth dating" for the other person.

There were three rules: (1) no sex, (2) I am serious, and (3) I want to remain a strong Christian. He understood. He supported me. He helped me be a stronger Christian woman. Sometimes, when I dwell in the past, he reminds me that when I came up from the water of my baptism, my sins were washed away. I was raised up from my death into salvation. Thank God!

**Shanika Allen is a pen name.*

ZACH GOES OUT ON A LIMB

Characters: Zach, Jesus, Jericho resident

Zach: I'm a short guy. Vertically-challenged. It doesn't really bother me. It doesn't affect my job—I can still do my work quite well.

Jericho resident: Yeah, he SHORT-changes all of us by over-taxing us. He charges more than he should and pockets the difference.

Zach: Tough job, but somebody's gotta do it.

Resident: Yeah, right.

Zach: The only time being short is a problem is when there's a crowd of people and I want to see something. Like the day when this famous prophet came to time—a guy named Jesus. I'd heard lots of stuff about him.

Resident: We'd all heard a lot about him. We all wanted to see him.

Zach: So the streets were full of people and I couldn't see a thing! Then I saw a tree with branches I could reach, so I got myself up in that tree and had the best view of all. Jesus came walking by, and then, all of a sudden, he stopped right under my tree and looked up at me.

Jesus: Hey Zach, what's for dinner?

Zach: uh ... I'm not sure.

Jesus: Well, whatever you're having, I'd like to share it with you. I'd like to come over for dinner.

Zach: Uh ... sure ... no problem.

Resident: That ain't right. Jesus going to eat with a tax-collector. Talk about the scum of society. (He looks at Zach) Sorry ... but you are.

Zach: I know. But I'm rich. So I don't care.

Jesus: But I do. I care about you, and about your soul. Riches don't make your soul happy. And the way you got that money? That ain't right either.

Zach: I know. Deep down in my heart, I know.

Jesus: So, would you like a new lease on life? A better way to live now and the promise of life after you die?

Zach: Yes, I would.

Jesus: Then follow me, do things my way, give money back to the people you have cheated, and you'll be on the right path.