

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Defining Love in the Marriage Relationship

by

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Two of the biggest problems facing society and church today are serial polygamy and marital infidelity. It is estimated that one out of every two marriages will end in divorce. Many of these marriages end on the grounds of irreconcilable differences when one of the partners discovers that s/he is no longer "in love" with the other. A large percentage of divorcees will become serial polygamists as they enter into new marital relationships and repeat the same vows of life long commitment to their new spouses. Of those who remain married, it is estimated that two-thirds have been involved in extra-marital affairs.

As with serial polygamy, "love"--or the lack thereof--is also blamed for marital infidelity. I'm sure we've all seen talk shows that feature individuals who have been unfaithful to their marriage vows. After witnessing one episode that featured a woman who professed Christianity, the pressing question in my mind was "Why?" All her friends and neighbors, and even her husband, felt that she was in a solid relationship. She confirmed to her audience that her husband was neither physically or verbally abusive. He provided for the family. He loved his children. He loved her. But she was turned off by him. She had fallen out of *love*. She had blocked herself from being receptive to his *love*. She now *loved* someone else. This new object of her affection was "tender and kind." He knew how to make her "feel like a woman." He took the time to listen to her problems. He would buy her gifts and shower her with attention. I almost forgot. He was also married with children. But, in her words, "he has shown me how to *love* again."

My mind--always in an etymological mode--forced me to blurt out the question, "What's *love* got to do with it?" A double crime has been committed here. Two people have flagrantly violated the seventh commandment, and this is being done under the guise of *love*? Not only was a husband being deprived of attention and loyalty, but another person's wife was too. And let's not forget the children. What if both of these marriages end in divorce? The pain. The heartache. The irreparable psychological damage. "What's *love* got to do with it?"

It seems to me that the problem lies with the way in which society defines love. Society has been so conditioned by the definitions of love in the media, that many have adapted the soap opera mentality. Love is an emotion. Something one feels. Even one of my favorite contemporary Christian groups refers to love as "the purest emotion." And one popular song trivializes love as a "second-hand emotion." However, I beg to differ. Marital love has little to do with emotion.

The type of "love" that society glorifies is defined by the Greek term *eros*. This erotic expression is driven purely by emotion, and is the type of "love" that leads to fatal attractions. *Eros* is addictive, and oftentimes it takes more than a twelve step program to free the victim. It is *eros* that forces individuals in committed relationships to experience a paradigm shift as they transfer amorous feelings from one person to another.

While *eros* will enhance a marriage relationship, it cannot serve as the foundation. Because it is based on emotion, it can be affected by changes in circumstances. I may love you today, but despise you tomorrow. *Eros* is unstable. Indeed, it is for this very reason that God does not place the marriage relationship on *eros*, but establishes it on *agape* (Eph 6:25; Col 3:19). *Agape*, a uniquely biblical term, defines a love that is based on principle. *Agape* is not a mere feeling, it is an intentional action. The love between a husband and wife should be focused and calculated, and not whimsical and serendipitous.

Perhaps the most poignant definition of *agape* occurs in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a. Paul commences by providing two general characteristics of love. Love, he says, is "patient and kind" (1 Cor 13:4a). The Greek word translated "patient" suggests a love that is "wide-hearted." A love that takes everything and everyone into consideration. A love that has a logical basis. Love is also "kind." It has good intentions and is driven by moral integrity. Love is sensitive to the feelings of those it affects.

As we read on, we find that the majority of Paul's definition is dedicated to describing eight things that love is *not* (1 Cor 13:4b-6). These eight disclaimers are not only intended to expound on the two general characteristics of love, but they attack popular opinion on the nature of love:

- "Love is not jealous." The word translated "jealous" can also mean "zealous." Many who are trapped in fatal relationships are obsessively controlled by the situation. Recently, a woman in Alabama was charged with killing her children because her fiancé felt that they were in the way. She is accused of murdering for love. While the vast majority of those who offend will not go to such extremes, one who violates the marriage bond is choosing paramour over children. However, true love is not blind. It sees the pain caused by jealous actions. Love does not provide the grounds for actively coveting the attentions of a third party. Love does not encourage one to steal another's spouse. Love does not possess one to kill his/her own spouse with hateful attitudes and feelings. Love is kind.
- "Love is not boastful." Love does not cause one to feel smug about the latest conquest. Love does not view the invitation of a stranger into one's marriage bed as a trophy to be protected. Love does not enable a person to glory in sin.

It does not drive one to proclaim, "You have the ring, but I have the wo/man."
Love is kind.

- "Love is not arrogant." The word translated "arrogant" is derived from the Greek word for "nature." The Sophist philosophers of antiquity suggested that nature was opposed to law. Nature was seen as emotional and free spirited while law was viewed as disciplined and principled. Nature followed the flexible law of soap opera romance while law was committed to God's ideal of life long fidelity. Paul states that love is not governed by "feel good" philosophy. It does not share the sentiment of the "Me Generation." It is not full of itself--not "puffed up." Love is patient.
- "Love is not rude." The same word for "rude" is used in 1Corinthians 7:36 when Paul refers to the improper conduct of those engaged to be married. Rudeness has to do with behavior that goes against specified norms. Behavior that violates proper codes of conduct. Behavior that repulses another to the point of discomfort and disgust. One can never claim that love has compelled him/her to flagrantly disrespect his/her spouse and violate the marriage bed. Love is kind.
- "Love does not insist on having its own way." Love is aware that there are consequences to every action. It does not have a bulldozer mentality. It is not in the habit of forging paths, cutting corners, and breaking rules to achieve the object of its desires. Love takes the feelings of others into account. It calculates the effects that one's actions will have on the family, the community, and the church. How will my actions of infidelity affect my children, my parents, my siblings...? What impact will this have on the stability of my community? How will people view my church and my God? Love is not like a spoiled child who throws a tantrum in a supermarket until he gets his way. Love is patient.
- "Love is not irritable." A true act of love should not evoke feelings of vexation and hatred in another. Love does not "get under your skin" and cause discomfort to the point that you yearn for relief. An action that leads another to resent can never be defined as love. A betrayal that drives a spouse to the divorce court can never be identified with love. A disloyalty that results in a lifetime of pain and never-fading memories can never be equated with love. Love is kind.
- "Love is not resentful." The original literally states that "love does not plan to do evil." I once heard a person state that she felt justified in her affair since her husband had been unfaithful to her. She was giving him a taste of his own medicine. She had planned for some time that if the opportunity arose, she would seize the moment. And so she nurtured a relationship with the husband of another. And now she *loves* him. She probably did not even realize that not

only was she avenging her husband, but she was attacking her paramour's wife. And she confuses **this** with love? Love does not glory in another's pain. Love is not vengeful or cruel. Love is kind.

- "Love does not rejoice at unrighteousness." One of the biggest fallacies in our era is that a married person can have a "love affair" with someone other than his or her spouse. One can be emotionally attached. One can be sexually attracted. But a love affair? If it is indeed God who joins together, how can *genuine* fulfillment come from one to whom you are not espoused? Many whose consciences have informed them of the disastrous nature of their decisions have chosen to adapt the sentiments of the popular song, "If loving you is wrong, I don't want to do right." No, "love does not rejoice at unrighteousness, but rejoices together with the truth." Love recognizes the pain experienced by spouses whose marital loyalties have been redirected by circumstance. But it empowers them to fidelity and provides the power to resist temptation. Love is patient.

As you read this, you may be among those who are confusing love with one of these non-definitions. You may currently be involved in an extra-marital affair. Or you may be forming a deep relationship with a member of the other sex who is not your spouse—one that may well lead to a tight and sinful emotional bond. However, while this person may make you feel complete and know just the right words to say, please don't be deceived into thinking that you are experiencing love. Love is from God. The same God who commanded us not to covet our neighbor's spouse. Who commanded us not to steal. Who commanded us not to kill. Who commanded us not to commit adultery. Who warned no wo/man to separate those who He has joined together. True love can only be found in Him.

In concluding his definition, Paul elevates four things that love does (1 Cor 13:7). First of all, love "bears all things." The full impact of this claim is only evident when it is realized that the word translated "bear" is derived from the Greek word for "roof." Love provides shelter, shade, and security from potentially dangerous elements. Love screams "NO!" at every foe who threatens to violate the haven of marriage.

Secondly, love "believes all things." Love is driven by a faith that sees potential happiness in the most sullen marriage relationship. Love believes that God is able to restore the romance to any decaying marriage. Whatever may have occurred between you and your spouse that has caused you to seek attention elsewhere, love believes that you can learn to accept and appreciate one another again.

Thirdly, love "hopes all things." It provides a basis for optimism. Hope is more than a wish or desire. Hope is akin to faith. There is a certainty in hope. Any

marriage in which love is present has a chance of survival. Love enables positive strides towards the ideal relationship. Love knows that with the help of God, *eros* is possible between you and your spouse.

Lastly, love "endures all things." Love exhibits a strength that is second to none. True love perseveres in spite of all the obstacles. Love enables the offended spouse to extend the arm of forgiveness. Love functions as the tender arms of God wrapped around the injured couple as they work through their ordeal. Love acts as the agent that silences the desire to file for divorce, or suppresses the longing to fall back into the arms of the one who had mesmerized you.

You may be included among the statistics of those who have sought for love outside the confines of sacred marriage. However, be assured that whatever you may be feeling right now, true "love never ends" (1 Cor 13:8a). A principled love always performs to the best of its ability. It may get difficult and discouraging at times as your head and your heart fall out of sync, but love never ends. For "better or worse" you continue to love the one to whom you pledged yourself before God and witnesses. A durable love may receive damage and require the help of a counselor, but it has a life-time warranty from God Himself. Everything worth anything needs to be meticulously maintained and carefully cultivated. If love for your spouse has become difficult, practice loving her/him until it becomes natural. After all, "What's love got to do with it?" Everything.

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