

On Love and Marriage

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So much has been written and spoken about love and marriage, but the subject remains a difficult and sensitive one for many, and this is understandable. The stakes are high. Everything is at risk for the young husband and wife, and there isn't really a backup plan. Few go into marriage saying, "If it doesn't work out, I'll just get a divorce." No, almost everyone enters marriage with the highest hopes and dreams, so that when a marriage fails, it is a devastating and tragic loss, even though it happens all the time. This is not to say that the husband and wife are merely victims of divorce or without responsibility for the marriage. It is to say that marriage is challenging. Even for those who have enjoyed lasting and godly marriages, each can point to mistakes they have made and how it was given to their spouse to forgive and to stay with the marriage. In no other relationship are sinful and selfish people called to such a oneness of relation. (see Genesis 2:23, Matthew 19:6) How is it possible except for the grace and power of God in our lives?

It is easy then, to understand the prevailing cultural resistance to marriage. People sense the difficulty and the risk, and opt for enjoying the benefits and privileges of marriage without actually being married. They may speak in terms of trial-running the relationship, testing their compatibility, of not wanting to make a big mistake. They are just hedging of course, and many will fail to see any value added by the exchange of marriage promises.

At the end of the wedding day, after all the planning, production and expense, what has actually been accomplished? A man and a woman have given their marriage

vow or promise to each other, before God and other witnesses, to love until death separates them. Marriage is a promise of future love, no matter what may come. Marriage is a promise of faithful and unfailing love, a love that resembles the love of God in Jesus Christ.

How is it then that God loves his people? Or what is its basis? If we can take God at his word, the Bible says that God the Father “chose us in him (meaning Christ) before the foundation of the world,” and “predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 1:3-6) In other words, God loves us based on his choice or promise to love us long before we ever came into being, not based on any merit or attractiveness of our own, and before we even had opportunity to do right or wrong. He promised and he is a promise keeper.

In a similar way, we too make our choice in marriage, but in contrast, that choice often comes with worldly strings attached: expectations of needs fulfilled, unspoken obligations contractual in nature. We have this expression of “falling in love,” meaning that we couldn’t help but love, so strong were our feelings for someone. I certainly remember what it was like to be young and in love. It is a powerful spell. But if I’m honest, it had more to do with how she made me feel, and how being with her would benefit me. Then time passes, feelings wane, people and their circumstances change and not always for the better, people grow old, their physical or mental health declines or fails, external pressures build relating to finances, work, children. The husband and wife become dissatisfied, even resentful. They begin to think, “I did not sign up for this.”

Even before marriage, think about all the critical evaluation, comparison and relational wreckage along the typical path to finding one’s “soulmate.” The notion that there exists a Mr. or Mrs. Right out there I admit is a romantic one, but it’s not one

based in reality. The husband makes his wife Mrs. Right when he makes his marriage promise to her, just as the wife makes her husband Mr. Right when she makes her marriage promise to him. The strength, success and happiness of any marriage will always depend on the quality of the promises the husband and wife have made to each other.

The love of God is matchless, incomprehensible, so much higher than the love we offer. Scripture teaches that he chose us by his grace, he gave us life, he gave us Christ and the Cross, he made sure we heard the gospel, he opened our eyes to the message concerning Christ that we might respond in faith. He brought us into his fold, into his family. And now he continues his saving work in us, conforming us to the image and likeness of Christ. This is what the Bible calls *sanctification*. We should see ourselves as being *set apart* more and more in his image and for his purpose. And he promises to complete his work in us. (see Philippians 1:6) I'm so grateful that God didn't give up on me. I'm so glad he didn't change his mind about me when he saw how I turned out, or when he saw how slow my progress has been in the faith. I can see that my every hope is based on his patient and steadfast love, which he has promised in Jesus Christ.

In order for us to become more like Jesus, we must learn to love more like Jesus. In the marriage relationship, we gain such an insight and familiarity with our partner's weaknesses, it almost seems unfair to know another person so well. And yet God who knows us best, loves us the most. By God's grace, we can see our marriage partner the way God sees him or her. If you are married, let him or her know that your promise is still good, and do this all the time. When we love according to our promise to love, we experience something of God's character. We become partakers of the divine nature in

our unity with and our love for our marriage partner. We become more like him. We come to know him more.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

Psalm 13:5