

# Love in Marriage

M. W. Bassford, 6-19-11

Life has been challenging for my father ever since my mother passed on. He's spending a lot of time these days processing, trying to figure out where he stands in his life right now, learning to cope with the reminders of her that are still all around him. Sometimes, life doesn't make that easy for him. Just a few weeks ago, the Eastside church in Columbia began a Wednesday night study on marriage and the family, so every Wednesday night, he has to go listen to an hour-long discussion of what he just lost. That's hard on him, and I'm proud of him for still attending services.

However, even though he's going, that doesn't keep him from grumbling about it a little bit. He doesn't understand why the church there does so much teaching on marriage and the family. "I was married for 48 years," he says, "and I never had any problems. What's so hard about marriage, that we have to study it over and over again?"

What my father doesn't recognize is that marriage isn't that easy for most people. My parents had one of those storybook marriages where they didn't even have any serious arguments, but for most of us, marriage takes more work than that. Even when both spouses are on their best behavior, issues arise that take effort to resolve, and whenever husband or wife starts being dumb, as we are so prone to do, that makes marriage even more complicated. The elders here don't tell me anything about their marriage-counseling sessions, and they're right not to tell me because it's none of my business, but I know elders in other congregations who say that they're often called in to resolve marital disputes.

With this in mind, it's good for all of us to take a step back from time to time and renew our focus on having godly marriages. There are some marriage roles that are specific to husbands and wives, but there are also some responsibilities that all Christians share. Let's look at one of these this morning as we explore love in marriage.

## Eros and Phileo

Our society today has a warped perspective on a lot of things, but some of the worst distortions show up in the area of love. Most Americans would probably define love in marriage as that giddy infatuation we feel when we first get romantically involved with someone else, and as soon as the thrill vanishes, they want to move on to another partner. Such a perspective on love is worthless as a guide to conduct. It only leads us to what we want to do, not what we ought to do. Instead, we're going to look at love through the lens of three Greek words, each of which is translated, "love."

The first of these words is **EROS**. *Eros* refers to a love that is physical and sexual in nature. Even though the word itself does not appear in Scripture, the concept certainly does. Look with me at 1 Corinthians 7:2-4. One of our greatest defenses against the temptation to sexual sin is to be the fulfillment that we find with our spouses. That's one of the reasons why God instituted marriage in the first place, so that the sexual urge can be governed and channeled in a useful way. Whenever one spouse starts withholding sex from another, for whatever reason, the withholding spouse is interfering with God's plan and defying His commandments. Commonly, we think of the wife as the guilty party in this, but I've also known of cases where the husband denied the wife her due. Either way, it's inexcusable and wrong.

We learn more about God's perspective on this from Matthew 5:31-32. According to Jesus here, one of the great problems with divorce is that the divorcing spouse causes the divorced spouse to commit adultery. Along with the dissolution of the marriage comes the end of the sexual outlet that marriage provides, and after an unscriptural divorce, the put-away spouse has only unlawful outlets to choose from. That spouse could in theory choose to remain celibate, but he or she most likely won't, and when that sexual sin occurs, the one who created the situation bears part of the guilt.

The same problem may occur even when a marriage has not been formally dissolved. Let's say that a husband refuses to come together with his wife. She still feels the need for some kind of fulfillment, so she begins to patronize sex chat rooms on the Internet or even starts an affair. Make no mistake: the wife in that situation is sinning. Pornography is always wrong; adultery is always wrong. However, she is not alone in her sin. Her husband's denial of her rights created the situation that led her into evil. Because of his selfishness, he bears part of the guilt for the sin she commits.

However, this doesn't mean that one spouse can callously demand access to the body of another, without regard for circumstance. Instead, we see God's expectations outlined in 1 Corinthians 7:33-34. In the sexual arena as well as any other, both husbands and wives must look to please their spouses. This requires compassion, sensitivity, and attentiveness to the needs of the other as well as the self. Sex in marriage is not some isolated thing. Instead, it is affected by the entirety of the marriage relationship. In many ways, sex is like the proverbial canary in the coal mine. When things start to go wrong in the bedroom, it's often a sign that there are problems elsewhere as well. When each spouse is devoted to pleasing the other, both publicly and privately, is when the sexual relationship is going to function the best.

Likewise, a good marriage must involve **PHILEO**. This is the Greek word for warm, companionate, friendship love. Unlike *eros*, it is found in Scripture, and indeed, it is applied specifically to marriage in Titus 2:3-4. In almost all happy marriages that I've seen, both husband and wife will describe the other spouse as their best friend, and that shows

that they have grasped the *phileo* aspect of marriage. From my perspective, this always appeared to be one of the great strengths of my parents' marriage. They were phenomenally close friends. After my dad retired, my mother would go off to a ladies' Bible class for an hour once a week, and that was all the time that they ever spent apart from one another. They went for walks together, they went to movies and football games together, they went on vacation together, and in everything that they did, they made it clear that they preferred the company of one another above all else.

We likewise must invest effort in nurturing our friendship with our spouses. It's OK for us to be close to our parents and other relatives. It's OK for us to have friends. However, all of those other relationships must take a clear second place to our marriages. It always makes me concerned when I see a Christian who refuses to cut the apron strings and move away from his or her parents, or a husband who would rather hang out with the guys instead of spending time with his wife, or a wife who goes on vacation with her girlfriends instead of her husband. All of those things are often signs of a struggling marriage, but the loudest alarm bell of all is when a married man or woman has a close friendship with a member of the opposite sex. I read a semi-humorous article a couple of months ago about "work husbands" and "work wives", in other words, somebody at the office you spend a lot of time with, and I couldn't help but cringe at what I was reading. At best, such a relationship is unwise; at worst, it's sinful or headed that way in a hurry. We need to leave opposite-sex friendships to single people and devote ourselves to spending time with our husbands and wives.

## Agape

Finally, the third Greek word for love that should be evident in our marriages is **AGAPE**. This is the other-focused, self-sacrificing love that Christ showed when He gave His life on the cross for our sins, and it should also be evident in our marriages. Like *phileo*, the Bible applies *agape* specifically to marriage. Among other places, we see it in Colossians 3:19. *Agape* is the single most important concept, not just in our marriages, but in our walk with God generally. Sadly, despite its importance, well-meaning brethren often mis-define and misapply it. What got me started on preaching this sermon in the first place was that my father was complaining, and rightfully so, about the way that the lesson book they're using in the marriage and family class defined *agape*. According to this book, *agape* is only an intellectual, determined love, which led you to do nice things for your spouse even though you didn't really want to.

We don't have to spend very much time with the Scripture at all before we start realizing how flawed this definition is. Let's look at 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Here, Paul describes a man who is intellectually determined to do nice things, to the point even of surrendering his body to be burned. And yet, Paul says that even this completely other-focused life can be loveless. If our version of *agape* is only intellectual, we're missing out on what God wants us to be.

We see a much better presentation of what *agape* is in Mark 12:29-30. In the Greek, the word for "love" here is *agape*. This *agape* love comes from the mind, it is true. However, it does not only come from the mind. It comes from the heart, which Scripturally is the union of our thoughts and emotions. It comes from our strength, from our will to do. Finally, it comes from our souls, from the very essence of who we are, and only as we put all of those things together can we truly express *agape* in our lives. This passage, of course, speaks with regard to our love for God and not our love for our spouses, but the same general principle applies. We must unselfishly love our spouses with all that we are.

What God commands us to do here is something that our culture insists is flatly impossible. We prefer to believe that, in the words of Elvis, "I can't help falling in love with you". If that's true, then it must also be true that I can't help falling out of love with you either. In accordance with this philosophy, so many people in the world spend their lives tossed about on the seas of passion, drifting from marriage to marriage and relationship to relationship, all because they have allowed themselves to become enslaved by what they feel. They justify themselves by saying they can't control it.

Brethren, nothing could be further from the truth. We can control what we think, and we can control what we feel. If, for instance, we find ourselves becoming emotionally attached to someone other than our spouse, we need to quit that. We need to stop spending time with that other person, we need to stop talking to them, and we need to stop thinking about them. In short, we need to have the self-discipline to get them out of our lives, whatever it takes. Once we've done that, any illicit romance between our ears will flicker and go out, just like a fire that's deprived of fuel.

The opposite is true too. If we find ourselves growing emotionally detached from our spouses, we need to make the commitment to love them. We need to spend more time with them, we need to keep the lines of communication with them constantly open, and we need to train ourselves to think well of them. Taken together, all of these things will rekindle our emotions. In any struggling marriage, there's a cycle of negativity going on, in which we think negatively of our spouse, and the negative thoughts lead to negative interactions, which lead to more negative thoughts. If that's our mindset, we cannot possibly practice *agape*. Let's end the vicious cycles and get our hearts where they belong.

Even though *agape* has such an important abstract component, it will reveal itself in concrete, practical ways. John captures this well in 1 John 3:18. Genuine *agape* produces action, not just pretty words. It will even lead us to do things that we consider distasteful, because of our love for our husband or wife. Christ didn't go to the cross because He loved the cross. He went to the cross because He loved God. It's up to us to make our marriages shine with that same love.