

# Romantic Love in Marriage

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Today is Valentine's Day; a national holiday of romantic love. It starts early with kids giving little Valentine's cards to their classmates. It might have a little candy heart with a word or two on it. *Be mine*. Scandals can erupt in a second grade classroom from messages on candy.

Romance is portrayed early on through Disney-type movies. Princes and princesses. Songs about love for the ages, love conquering beasts, pirates, and evil spells. Love is sunsets and happily ever after.

These children become teenagers. The portrayal of love remains just as idealized, but much more sexualized. Romantic love is a furious and all-consuming emotion and must lead the main characters into the bedroom for an experience that is so celestial and rapturous as to define all reality. This is bizarre at times, like with werewolves, but I digress. So the child in our contemporary culture is taught from an early age that real love is romantic love and intense feelings are the basis for love and marriage.

Girls grow up thinking marriage is all about the wedding ceremony. You are the princess and the whole gala must celebrate your love as the most intense love in all of history that two human beings have ever experienced. If you make it to your wedding night as virgins, that night of passion will alter all reality. Time will stop. Ocean tides will pause. The tectonic plates of the earth will move. The universe itself will be changed for such is the power of romantic and sexual love. The last part there I got carried away.

It is very difficult to talk about romance biblically when our culture has deified it. Marital love is romantic but it is so much more than merely romantic. I am going to try and let the Bible and the gospel put it where it needs to be but it might feel like I'm being sacrilegious to romance. I'm actually trying to save the blessing of romantic love.

## What is Romantic Love?

If you've come here for any amount of time then you know that we so often go back to God as the starting point of the world we see around us. The heavens declare his glory (Psalm 19:1 ESV), the world portrays his divine attributes (Romans 1:19-20), and the whole earth is full of his glory (Isaiah 6).

## Romance is God's created reflection of...

### The mutual commitment and celebration within the Trinity

The most romantic couple in the world isn't a couple. It is the Triune God—non-gender, non-sexual, but purely romantic in the sense of intimacy, tender love, and absolute covenantal commitment. Inter-Trinitarian love is the divine, spiritual prototype on which romance and sexual love is based.

## Jesus' delight in his church

*"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*" (Ephesians 5:31-32)

Paul quotes Genesis 1's summary of God's plan for marriage: a man who leaves the authority structure of his parents to hold fast to a woman, and his new wife who leaves the parental authority structure of her home. This man and woman form a new family unit and unity. They become one flesh. That oneness is most certainly more than sexual union but it includes sexual union and all the aspects of human marital sexuality including attraction, emotional and spiritual intimacy, and intercourse as well.

Verse 32, *"This mystery is profound and I am saying it refers to the Christ and the church."* Paul pivots from the marital purpose for intimacy and says all of that is mysteriously referring to something else. Marriage and romantic love is a symbol of something else. What? Christ and the church. How? Romantic attraction and tenderness in marriage reflects how Jesus woos and embraces his church. *"Jesus delights in us like a bridegroom for his bride."* (Isaiah 61:10)

I got married three and a half years ago. I got married in my mid-40s. I had years of waiting. When I married Jennifer, I wanted her so bad, and I mean in all the ways God calls holy. Think for a moment—those intense cravings are but a very tiny reflection of the actual desire Christ has for his church—and Christian—for you.

## Romantic Love's Place in Marital Love

If we think about the components of marital love like building blocks, what would you include? Covenant. Sacrifice. Protection. Romance. If we were going to build this, how would you wisely build a home with these blocks? Let's look at how the Bible describes it. Note: each successive block is smaller than the one below it. [See picture on page 3.]

The foundation of marriage biblically is covenant. It's not feelings. It's not my mom liked him. It's not his truck. It's covenant. Marriage is a covenant. That's why you recite vows at the ceremony.

Next, would be the essence of what biblical love is: sacrifice. Again, it's not a feeling. It is sacrifice. How do we know that? How did Jesus love us? He gave his life for us, right? That agape love, that self-giving thing would be next.

I would put protection or provision next. There are different words you could use for that: safety, security.

And then a very important part would be romance and sexual love. You can be married without this part, but that's not a biblical marriage. Biblical marriage includes this.



Figure 1-Building Blocks of Marital Love

The world's starting point or foundation is the sexual attraction and romantic feelings. This rarely involves any promise to provide or protect (think the one-night stand where the guy is out the door and doesn't want to know if any kids come). This is the hookup culture of the university and singles' culture.

This bleeds over into Christian's approach to marriage where their favorite verse is, "*It is better to marry than to burn with passion.*" (1 Corinthians 7:9) So if I am burning with passion that's biblical permission to marry whoever, whenever. The problem is that most men are burning with passion since about the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Applied out of context, that verse would have authorized me to marry half the girls in my Junior High.

I remember hearing a sermon once on this in my single days. The speaker said, "*Listen, my wife is smoking hot and there's no issue there. But I would not get married for sex.*"<sup>1</sup> That pastor was speaking wisdom. Romance and sexual love can't support the weight of marriage. Denis de Rougemont once said, "*Love ceases to be a demon only when he ceases to be a god.*"<sup>2</sup>

The Bible celebrates sexuality but it doesn't worship it. It doesn't force it to carry the marriage. It can't. Proof is all these amazingly beautiful and sensual Hollywood types who marry and divorce in a matter of months. What do they discover? No matter how beautiful the body, if that spouse is as selfish, egotistical, and publicity-hogging as they are, it won't work.

Singles and young people, remember, *there is a lot of living between the loving*. Where this message is going is that the livin' between the lovin' is what makes the lovin' really great.

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<sup>1</sup> Author Unknown.

<sup>2</sup> Denis de Rougemont, as quoted by C.S. Lewis in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950-1963*, p. 687.

## Cultivating Romance in your Marriage

I am in the early stages on this in my marriage. Please don't take anything I say here as me portraying myself as an expert. I am a lover-in-process. As a husband, there's incredible pressure to stand in front of anyone and speak on this. The sound of laughter you may hear is my wife Jennifer.

The Song of Solomon is a biblical book on romantic love. It describes the longings and pleasures of romantic love in poetic and veiled language. It captures the romantic love talk between a husband and wife. The difference in how a man and woman sees and feels romance is seen in their language. Men and women are different. And each spouse is unique. This requires intentionality in how we approach our spouse. How are they wired? What speaks to them? How can I enter into their emotions and desires and love romantically the wife or husband God has given me?

*"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."* (1 Peter 3:7)

Husbands, we are to be students of our wives, including how they feel about romance. The principle goes both ways. Wives should be students of their husbands. We like to think the rush of emotion just happens (like in the movies). In marriage, it doesn't just happen that way.

## Cultivating romance with your wife

How important is this to wives?

*"For a man romantic experiences with his wife are warm and enjoyable and memorable—but not necessary. For a woman, they are her lifeblood. Her confidence, her sexual response, and her zest for living are often directly related to those tender moments when she feels deeply loved and appreciated by her man. That is why flowers and candy and cards are more meaningful to her than to him. That is why she is continually trying to pull him away from the television set or the newspaper, and not vice versa.... This need for romantic love is not some quirk or peculiarity of his wife, as some may think. This is the way women are made."*<sup>3</sup> (James Dobson)

Femininity is made by God to respond to a man's initiative. It's easy for us to think, yep, the sight of my biceps will make her go crazy. Why? Because we are visually oriented. The sight of her body makes us go crazy and we project visual orientation onto our wives. But women could not be more different. Sadly. C.J. Mahaney has good advice, *"In order for romance to deepen, you must touch her heart and mind before you touch her body."*<sup>4</sup>

How do we "touch her heart"?

## Serve her

Women love biceps when they are moving a vacuum cleaner. We tend to think, *Hey, I work all day and put food on the table. Isn't that enough service?* In man-world, yes. In woman-

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<sup>3</sup> James Dobson, *Love for a Lifetime: Building a Marriage That Will Go the Distance*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>4</sup> C.J. Mahaney, Source unknown.

world, not even close. Women love their men serving them in generally unexpected ways. Unnecessary ways. Inconvenient-to-us ways.

Take a moment and think about this. Marriage is built on the paradigm of Christ and the church. In marriage, women reflect the church, so why would sacrificial service touch their hearts? Jesus came to serve the church. He did so extravagantly. We celebrate his service with each communion. We can't get over it. It fires up the church with holy affection for Christ.

Song of Solomon 7:1 says, *"How beautiful are your feet in sandals!"* Solomon praises her feet. But in that culture, to be at their feet in sandals was to be in a position of serving. Perhaps washing her feet. When we wash our wives' feet, something happens in their hearts. Something powerful. Romantic. Even sexual.

A noted female columnist has said that to her, "The sound of a vacuum cleaner is foreplay."<sup>5</sup> I polled the ladies in my small group and asked *what is romantic to you in marriage?* Nearly everything they said had to do with their husbands serving them inconveniently or surprisingly.

### **Listen to her**

How do we understand our wives? Doesn't this require us to listen to her? To engage her in questions? One of the cues that I'm losing romantic traction with Jennifer is when she says, "Are you listening to me?"

Many of us will have special times today or this weekend with our spouses. Try having some prepared questions that draw her out. Think about it in advance. Maybe write them down. It's easy for couples to get so comfortable with each other that things like this feel unnecessary or silly. I would like to think a wife would find it really sexy for a husband to pull out a list of self-prepared questions to understand her better.

Listening is how we engage in the feelings of our wife. We will not understand those feelings fully, but by listening it builds an emotional connection with her.

### **Affirm her**

You cannot read Song of Solomon without being struck by the words of affirmation spoken. Say what you want about Solomon, but he convinced 1,000 women to marry him. He must have been pretty good with words.

*"Behold, you are beautiful, my love,  
    behold, you are beautiful!  
Your eyes are doves  
    behind your veil.  
Your hair is like a flock of goats  
    leaping down the slopes of Gilead.  
Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes  
    that have come up from the washing,  
    all of which bear twins,  
    and not one among them has lost its young....  
You are altogether beautiful, my love;*

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<sup>5</sup> As quoted by Tommy Nelson in *The Book of Romance: What Solomon Says About Love, Sex, and Intimacy*, p. 181

*there is no flaw in you.” (Song of Solomon 4:1-2, 7)*

We get what we affirm. Critical words affirm negatives. Positive words affirm positives. Which will the husband choose? Serve her. Listen to her. Affirm her. Do that all day today and all I can say is, Happy Valentine’s Day.

### **Cultivating romance with your husband**

I’m not going to spend as much time on husbands, because frankly, we are much more simple. All it takes for us to enjoy that lovin’ feeling is you giving us a look. No vacuum cleaners needed.

Wives, your responsibility is to model the church in the relationship. There is little needed to stir romantic love in your husband, but there are many things you can do to freeze the marriage over.

### **How should the church relate to Jesus?**

We celebrate his sacrifice, we respectfully submit to him, and we make it clear that he is our first love.

### **Celebrate his sacrifices**

Jesus asked that we remember his sacrifice through a regular ceremony. Communion. We celebrate what Jesus did.

There is a big difference here in that men are needy humans; Jesus is not. But the model certainly applies. Most men can quickly feel taken advantage of when their wives get an entitlement mentality. Wives, we love to be acknowledged! We love appreciation when we serve you. This can be verbal or nonverbal. Even marital intimacy is a kind of ritual of remembering and celebrating, isn’t it? This might be one reason God made that important to a husband.

A godly wife will celebrate her husband and celebrate his servings and sacrifices. When a guy believes his wife thinks he’s the bomb, that’s very romantic for us.

### **Respectfully submit to him**

The most repeated admonition to wives is to respect and submit to their husbands. Why? Because a wife who dominates or leads her husband is perverting the picture of Jesus and the church. Does the church lead Jesus? Usurp Jesus? Dominate Jesus? Never. There’s something that’s very emasculating about a wife who controls or manipulates her husband. Let him lead. You may be smarter or wiser, but let him lead. It’s his calling.

This is much more than simply actions, but it’s also the tone and attitude you have. Have you ever been around a couple where the tone of the wife’s voice toward her husband shows she respects him? Don’t you admire that? Guess what wives? Her husband is a sinner just like yours. It takes incredible grace to be a wife, but the gospel is all about incredible grace and a Christian wife will be too.

## Make it clear he is your first love

A well-known marriage book called *Love and Respect* makes the point that Eve had paradise but she wanted more.<sup>6</sup> This is a huge struggle for women. Discontentedness: with your body, your house, your car, your husband, your whatever. But husbands tend to bear the brunt of it. Every husband is a sinner. Every husband is a disappointment on some level. That is not the issue. The issue is holding him first in your heart and not allowing discontentment or comparison to steal your joy in him.

Jesus admonishes the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:4 for forgetting him as their first love. Jesus rightly has that place in the heart of the church and the wife needs to show the husband he is first in her heart.

Listen to your words. How do you talk about him? How do you talk about him with your friends? Your hairdresser? Your mom? Your kids? Your words should sound like in your heart that your husband is your number one. Solomon's wife talks about Solomon way better than he actually was. Love allows for that. When a husband senses that his wife is at least one person in the world who truly loves him, it summons deeper levels of love and service. Who is blessed by that? The husband, but the wife as well.

I hope these help. A final word from Song of Solomon 6:3, "*I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine!*"

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Emerson Eggerichs, *Love and Respect*, page unknown.