

# Learning from the Psalms: Love and Marriage (?)

February 13, 2011

Pastor Chip Fisher

Psalm 45: 4-15, 1 Cor. 13:4-8a; 13

---

---

Valentine's Day always provides a nice chance to look together at the challenges and the opportunities hidden in love in general and in romantic love in particular. (By the way nobody's sure, these days, exactly who was the original St. Valentine, or how he came to be associated with love and marriage and sweethearts. There certainly was one—archaeologists have found references to him in the Roman catacombs. The best guess is that he was a Christian official who kept performing his duties, including marrying couples in the Church, when it was illegal under the Emperor Claudius Gothicus to do so. Valentine was thrown in prison and was apparently holding his own until he tried to convert the emperor to Christ. No doubt Christ liked this but Claudius did not: he had Valentine beaten and clubbed to death in 270 AD—and his head chopped off for good measure. So be of good cheer: no matter how you are doing in your love life, things could always be worse!)

In Psalm 45 there's this man, this king, who straps on his sword to go out to slay God's enemies and to battle for the right and the good and the true and the fair. (It's really about the coronation of a new king of Israel, and the early Church understood it to point to describe King Jesus, but God is with him in any case.) But this psalm is also describing a wedding celebration: the beautiful princess is ushered into the castle with her bridesmaids and it says "the king will greatly desire her beauty." Things haven't changed that much: the bride wants to be at her very most beautiful and the groom is pretty much ready to go—he greatly desires her (even in translation you know what that means, and it's a good thing) and they both want to live happily ever after in love forever.

So how long do you think it'll last? (Maybe it's a vocational flaw of mine, or maybe just a personal flaw—but when you're at a wedding, or you read about some celebrity marriage, do you ever wonder how long it'll last? I know I'm not God and it's not my business, but sometimes I do wonder.) Whether you're a king and a queen or just us normal people, it's difficult, this business of trying to have a happy marriage.

For one thing, expectations between men and women tend to be very different. Just think about how we each tend to think of Valentine's Day this morning. Come on, guys: aren't you thinking Valentine's Day is a commercial hoax perpetrated by Hallmark targeted to gullible

and vulnerable females so you have to go out and buy something or other, though you're never quite sure what? (Maybe I'm wrong: maybe you men entered in, saw these great decorations which Linda prepared so beautifully for us, and thought, "Oh, boy...Valentine's Day is coming tomorrow. My favorite day of the year! I have been waiting for this for months!") I think most guys, at least until they have spent a lot of time in the company of women, are like the old-school husband who told his long-suffering but still-hopeful wife, "I told you I love you the day we were married 38 years ago and if anything had changed I'd have let you know." Many men are acutely aware they promised the day they were married that they would never go after another woman—and compared to keeping faithful to that promise, they figure, what difference could an occasional card or chocolates or flowers—or diamonds—possibly make? Who could think little romantic reminders could confused for anything significant—like keeping this one very unnatural promise?

Women, I'm guessing, tend to approach Valentine's Day differently. You may be thinking something like "If he had any idea how much I'm thinking about him, worrying about him, trying to help him avoid the next pitfall he's so obviously heading toward, trying to plan ahead for both of us and be responsible for our relationship and our household and everything else, 24/7...If he had any appreciation of how hard I try to hold my peace, not to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, not to hurt his feelings—as much as I try to love my husband, and as challenging as it can be, I'd say a card or flowers or a nice romantic reminder just about every day, plus a diamond every year, wouldn't be too often. About right. Plus, it would make both of us very happy, wouldn't it. Who could possibly think romantic gestures—early and often—are insignificant?

Expectations for women and men entering into marriage tend to be very different. A woman has her girlfriends with whom she talks and bonds and connects. She shares very personal things with her best friend(s.) In person, over the phone, texting. She assumes or at least hopes, of course, her husband is going to want to spend endless hours talking, bonding, connecting with her—hearing how her day went, how she's feeling, and equally eager to tell her everything go on in his deepest heart. (One prominent marriage counselor describes women's three chief needs entering into marriage as conversation,

affection, and open and honesty in relationship. [William Harley; *His Needs, Her Needs*.]

A man, with his buddies, can play five hours of golf and never say anything more personally revealing than, “I just have one question. How could you possibly have missed that 6-inch putt?” Everybody’s happy. Boys like to do things with their buddies—but mostly it doesn’t occur to them to talk about it. A young man is hoping, or assuming, his wife will want to do lots of fun things with him—the most fun of which is plenty of sex, of course—and why would they ever want to talk a lot about personal things since that’s how arguments and disagreements start, and who wants those? [Harley also notes that sexual fulfillment is the chief need of most husbands—in case anyone had any doubts.]

Very different expectations between typical males and females—of which these are just a few—form a recipe for romantic heartbreak and hurt. It’s hard to sustain a happy marriage.

(Thank you for your patience until now, those of you who may not be married or in a romantic relationship. Whether you wish you were or are glad you’re not; whether marriage has been kind to you or cruel. Marriage is not easy in any case.)

But I want to expand out now to address a principle about love in general. God has created every one of us to exist in loving relationship with others—whether we’re 2 or 32 or 92 years old. (Not everyone is called to be married; the goal is always to be faithful to God today, and appropriately loving to others, as you are and where you are this day.) Every one of us, at our best, longs for community. For closeness, for intimacy. To know and be known. For safe relationships where we can be relaxed and love and be loved. Every one of us (when healthy) yearns to grow in relationships with others as well as with God. God has created us so.

“Do you feel you know what love really is?” one researcher asked college students. Three quarters of females and two thirds of males were uncertain. [Wm Kephart, cited in *Touchstone*, May 2009] There is room for confusion about this term “love.” Social scientists have tried to isolate many kinds of love; the current winner has come up with 20 different variations. You may know that the New Testament generally translates three different Greek terms into the English “love.” (Those happen to be “eros,” “philia,” and “agape.” The point, however, is what good they are and how we live them.)

A second reason that most marriages, based on romantic love, are so difficult to maintain is that passion is generally not a “giving” love, but a “getting” love. Romantic love

based on excitement is a “need” love. A grasping love. “Eros” is being hungry, wanting to fill myself up with something else—it could be chocolate or theatre or romantic novels—or a lover. I am fulfilled for a while. (When it’s another person to fulfill me, we could call eros infatuation or “puppy love” whether it strikes at sweet 16 or at 86.) It is exciting and emotional: “an irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired,” noted Mark Twain. (By the way, most cultures in most eras thought this romantic love or “need” love was a weakness or even a disgrace: from Confucius to the Ancient Egyptians and Classical Greeks to Australian aborigines. Even in Europe until, literally, the “Romantic” Age swept in two centuries ago, courtship was conducted and overseen much differently.)

You can see the problem: if “eros” or romantic or “getting” love is the basis, a relationship can only disintegrate. (This basis can usually survive 18 months to three years.) It’s hungry, it’s all about “my” pleasure, “my” happiness, am I getting what I deserve and want and need? “I want, I need... therefore it must be that I love,” says romantic love, “getting” love. Romantic love, by itself, is selfish. It has nothing to do with the kind of love Jesus knows and lives.

In contrast, for example, Paul’s description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 describes the “giving” kind of love—the love that God knows. If “getting” love is about consumption, “giving” love is about production. Giving love is freely chosen—not something you may or may not fall into. Giving love is not a desire as much as a decision; an action more than a feeling. Instead of self-fulfillment, this giving love works toward the fulfillment of the other. A healthy, enduring marriage or romantic relationship needs to evolve from the passions of “eros” to the commitment of “agape” or it will never work—and a transitional blending of the best of each is the goal.

When Jesus bids us “love your neighbor as yourself” there’s not much doubt as to whether He’s thinking “getting love” or “giving love.” When we learn “God is love;” not much doubt. “Love one another as I have loved you” has nothing to do with this impassioned “getting” kind of love.

Paul’s description provides a handy checklist, at that. (He uses the word “agape” or this giving love 14 times in 13 verses, and this kind of love is the basis of any enduring or mutually fulfilling relationship.) How would you say you are managing in your loving relationships? God’s kind of love, the love that lasts, “is kind... is patient. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on having its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love does not keep score or keep track;... love bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things,

endures all things. Love never ends.” (These qualities cannot long coexist with “getting” love. An enduring love—marriage or otherwise—must be characterized by these characteristics.)

A satisfying and enduring marriage—or friendship, for that matter—is difficult when expectations are not realistic, and when the very foundation is a kind of “love” which is not love and cannot last almost by definition. If I’m primarily “looking out for #1”, the most natural thing in the world, then I cannot also be “looking out for you.” The good news is that none of us gets this quite right; every one of us enters the world already primed to love ourselves. We are each one of us on a journey of faith and transformation; we are each allowing the Holy Spirit to change us from self-centered, “me, me, me” babies to mature adults able to obey, as the Spirit directs us; able to love others, in time, because we know and feel and have experienced that God has first loved us. However you have fared in relationships until now, you keep offering yourself to the living God in whom you are known and beloved and safe. Jesus is the One who will not betray your trust; Jesus will not leave you nor forsake you. People may always disappoint you—and some already have. Jesus will not.

We’re already part way into what I want you to do in order to enjoy stronger friendships; a more fulfilling marriage. Three suggestions:

First, continue to remember God is the Source of love. Turn to God to be made whole, to be filled up. Not your spouse, not your mother or your father or your child or your friend. I cannot love others with what I have not myself. When I am feeling dry or empty or sad I am to go to the Living Water to be refreshed. (It’s not fair for me to go to my wife Trish to try to take from her what God alone can give: she is wonderful, but she is not God. I can love her or I can use her, but they are not the same. She wants to hear how I’m doing, and she loves me, and I am committed to telling her what’s going on in me—but my happiness is between God and me.) When you are right with God your relationships will be different because you will be different.

Second: Keep choosing to love with “giving love.” No matter what your mate is offering or giving you; no matter whether it seems you are receiving back as much as you are giving out. (Of course if there is abuse, adultery, or addiction going on, that’s different. Get some help.) When you are married, your promise is to love your mate. Not when she pleases you, not when he deserves your love. Your job is to receive what you need from God; give what you are able to your spouse. (If it seems to you

that you are consistently being used or manipulated, then you’d best talk with someone about that also.) You can always pray mightily for him or her.

I am always responsible for my attitude. I cannot always change my circumstances and I cannot fix anyone else, try as I might. But if I change my attitude to one of love and acceptance, and allow the Spirit to fix me, good things have a way of happening. And even if my spouse does not come around—that’s not my business. Even if my marriage is not what I expected or hoped for: we’re not done yet. God has all eternity to make up to me what was not right down here—but my responsibility here is not to fix the lives of everyone around me. It is to allow God to keep changing me, in time, so that I am able to love my mate and my family and those around me with a “giving” love.

Sometimes hanging onto God means relaxing our hold over others, which we had been confusing with love.

Hear these thoughts: “To ‘Let Go’ Takes Love”

To let go does not mean to stop caring; it means I can’t do it for someone else.

To let go is not to cut myself off; it’s the realization I can’t control another...

To let go is not to try to change or blame another; it is to make the most of myself.

To let go is not to judge, but to allow another to be a human being.

To let go is not to fix, but to be supportive.

To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes, but to allow others to effect their own destinies

To let go is not to deny, but to accept.

To let go is not to nag, scold, or argue, but instead to search out my own shortcomings and correct them.

To let go is not to adjust everything to my desires, but to take each day as it comes, and to cherish myself in it.

To let go is not to criticize and regulate anybody, but to try to become what I dream I can be.

To let go is to fear less and to love more. (by Margaret J. Rinck)

Third: wives, and husbands, are you willing to commit to a different response to your spouse for the next week, or month, or year—until you get it right? (Naturally, if my comments have nothing to do with you or your situation, please forgive the insult...and I apologize.)

Wives: (as I heard one of you repeat not long ago: “never miss the chance to keep quiet.”) Can you go for a week,

a month, longer, without a single negative word to, or about, your husband? Can you resist the temptation to correct or fix or teach him for that long? (After all, fair is fair. Would he have married you if he had known he was going to become a lifelong “project” for you to make acceptable? When you were dating, did you speak as if he was constantly in need of your advice and critique? By all means—if he is as open and communicative with you as you dreamed of, then keep doing exactly what you’re doing. But if he’s not sharing as deeply as you’d like, or as he used to, why might that be? When and how did it stop being “safe” for him to share himself with you?)

And husbands: are you willing to pay full attention to your wife when she comes into the room? Any room you’re in? Stop what you’re doing, and focus, as if what she has to say, and to ask, is the most important thing in your world? Are you willing to pay attention to all the various details she wants to share with you, and to try to share with her and trust to her what’s going on inside you? Can you stop retreating or hiding from her conversation for a week or a month or however long it takes? (After all, fair is fair. Would she have married you if she thought you were going to tune her out, and make her track you down, in order simply to converse with you, the one she has chosen? When you were dating, trying to win her, how much effort did you make to communicate in ways satisfying to her? Then get back to it now.)

“Love never ends.”

You can bet human love, “getting” love, romantic love sure does. God’s love, “giving” love, never ends. Love the ones God has given you with His love. Faith, hope, and love abide; the greatest of these is love.

### **Psalm 45:4-15**

4 In your majesty ride on victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right; let your right hand teach you dread deeds.

5 Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the king’s enemies; the peoples fall under you.

6 Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity;

7 you love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;

8 your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;

9 daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor; at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.

10 Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your people and your father’s house,

11 and the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him;

12 the people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts, the richest of the people

13 with all kinds of wealth. The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes;

14 in many-colored robes she is led to the king; behind her the virgins, her companions, follow.

15 With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king.

### **1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13**

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.