

Love Your Husband/Wife • Ephesians 5:25-33; Titus 2:1-5

How do you know for sure that you are really in love? Simple—get an MRI of your brain and find out for sure. It probably isn't covered by health insurance, but it might actually work.

On November 7, 2000, a paper was presented at the New Orleans meeting of the Society for Neuroscience. Reported by the Associated Press, the paper came out of the research of a doctoral student, Andreas Bartels, at University College London. Through functional MRIs (brain scans showing the brain over time instead of a still picture) seventeen students who said they were truly in love—and whose statements were backed up by psychological tests—were shown a series of pictures. When the picture of the person they were in love with appeared, four brain areas lit up showing extra brain activity. Not only did these show with whom they were in love, but other areas of the brain that typically report anxiety were dormant when the person they loved was shown on the photograph.

So love is good. But love and marriage are even better. A few years ago an extensive study was reported to the American Sociological Association meeting in Washington, D.C. According to sociologist Patrick McKenry of Ohio State University, "Marriage apparently is the best tonic for mental health. Over a five-year period, getting married or staying married reduces symptoms of depression far more than being single or divorced." But it must be marriage—living together won't work. According to the research, "Co-habiting offers no improvement in mental health over being single." Even unhappy marriages can be mentally healthful. "Unhappily married partners get less of a mental health boost than the happily wed, but they still fare better, overall, than the single or divorced." According to researcher McKenry, "Feelings of emotional support, stability and commitment may account for spouses' greater sense of well-being." Love and marriage are a good and powerful combination. Together they can make you healthier, happier and more effective. But they don't always go together.

The worst of times is when marriages crumble throughout society, when few marriages are happy,

when love is missing, when divorce is common. Living together is the rule rather than the exception. Selfishness and sexual promiscuity overtake love and faithfulness. When it seems as if every marriage is a bad or sad marriage, how does one find love and happiness?

Perhaps the worst of times was the first century Roman Empire. During the first five hundred years of the Roman Republic there was not one reported case of divorce. The first divorce of record was in 234 BC. But then the numbers began to increase until, by the first century, divorce was so rampant that the institution of marriage itself was significantly at risk. Divorce was so easy and common in Palestine that young girls were refusing to get married in the first place. The Greeks were so frivolous about marriage that one writer says that "home and family life were near to being extinct and fidelity was completely non-existent." The Romans were no better. They dated the years not by numbers but by the names of their husbands and

wives. One woman was married to her twenty-third husband and she was his twenty-first wife.

In the midst of these worst of times St. Paul wrote about the Christian approach to love and marriage. It was a radically different approach. It called Christians to sacrificial, beneficial, caring and exclusive relationships. It was a message of purity rather than promiscuity, of love rather than lust, of one person being devoted to a marriage partner rather than simply using a marriage partner for convenience and dumping that person when it became inconvenient. So a revolution began to take place as Christians adopted a totally different paradigm. Couple by couple, year-by-year, generation-by-generation, eventually the entire Empire was transformed.

Here's what St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:25-33:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant

Imagine a love for each other that is so strong and so committed that she will do anything for him and he will do anything for her...

church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

When I was a graduate student in Denver, Charleen worked for the Mountain States Bank. One of her responsibilities was to watch out for counterfeit currency. I remember a conversation we had about a story I read on the training of Secret Service agents to identify counterfeit bills. The article indicated that the primary focus of training is not on the counterfeits but on the genuine article, the assumption being that you could spend the rest of your life looking at all the variations of counterfeiting. What you really need to know well is the genuine article. Charleen told me that when you look at the real thing all day it’s easier to spot a fake. On the other hand, you could study the variety of counterfeits forever and never really know what the genuine currency looks like.

It’s the same with love in marriage. We could spend forever talking about the potential problems, the celebrity calamities and the tragic counterfeits but never know what the best of marriages looks like. So let’s take a look and see what it looks like for a Christian to love your husband or wife.

The words that were first spoken to husbands can be applied to Christian wives, as well—“*love your spouse just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*” The model is Jesus Christ who stepped down from the glories of heaven and self-sacrificed for us. In the same way, husbands and wives are to self-sacrifice for each other. This may sound as revolutionary to some today as it did in the first century. It is the opposite of selfishness and self-seeking. Instead of asking what she can do for me I ask what I can do for her.

In extreme cases this may mean life itself, but that is exceptionally rare. One couple committed that they would always seek to meet the other’s

smallest need. If she wanted a drink of water during the night, he would get up and bring it to her. If he forgot to turn off the porch light, she would get up and shut it off for him. Often the most important sacrifices are the smallest sacrifices. It’s sacrificing an opinion or an opportunity to get even or a personal convenience. It is based upon a notion that in marriage Christians are to seek the desires and pleasure and happiness of the other person. That’s certainly true in what the Bible teaches about sexual relationships. It is a marital love where the greatest sexual joy is in pleasing your partner. In I Corinthians 7:4-5 the sexual relationship is described:

The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other. . . .

Imagine a love for each other that is so strong and so committed that she will do anything for him and he will do anything for her—not just in theory, but in practice; a love strong enough to make sacrifices for the other person. The sacrifice may be time at work, giving up smoking, getting help to stop drinking, getting up early in the morning to pray together or go for a walk even though you would rather sleep late.

The true lover is always asking, always thinking, always choosing on the basis of “What can I do for her?” “What can I do for him?” And this is not a painful sacrifice. This is a joyful sacrifice. There is an indescribable pleasure in giving to the one that you love.

A sacrifice fly ball in baseball helps your team to win. A vacation day sacrificed to attend your son or daughter’s graduation is a joyous highlight of life. The sacrifice of \$100 to buy a special gift for your best friend is a fun thing to do.

What could you do to love your wife . . . to love your husband . . . sacrificially? Just be sure to understand that it is never sacrifice simply for sacrifice’s sake. Christian love is sacrifice that is beneficial to the other person. St. Paul wrote:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

In Christian marriage we are to follow the example of Jesus who sacrificed himself for our benefit. He died so that we can be Christians who are clean and radiant and holy and good. That's what a loving husband does for his wife. That's what a loving wife does for her husband. She encourages him to grow in his faith. He helps her learn how to pray. They push each other to follow Jesus Christ. Loving husbands and wives lead each other into holiness, not sin.

The number one reason couples grow spiritually, worship regularly, live righteously and endure adversity faithfully is that they love one another in a way that is spiritually beneficial. Every couple faces problems, discouragement and defeats. Blessed are those couples who help each other overcome those adversities with grace and come out the other side stronger than they were before. I've seen married couples go through bankruptcy, unemployment, cancer, extra-marital affairs and the death of a child and make it because of sacrificial love that benefited the other. The question at the end of every day and on every anniversary is, "Have I loved my husband/wife into a better person than he/she would otherwise have been without my love?"

The third mark of Christian love for a husband or wife is caring. Ephesians 5:29 says the love for a spouse is to be like the love for our own bodies—caring for the person you're married to just the way Jesus cares for Christians. Caring runs the gamut from providing physically to being nice. Love means going to work, earning a living, providing clothes and food and shelter. (The Bible uses harsh words for those who don't properly provide for their families.)

But caring also includes kind words, saying "thank you", laughing at the other person's jokes even if you've heard them before, remembering birthdays, waiting for the other person before you start eating and a thousand other considerations. If you care for someone you focus on their needs and desires and do your best to fulfill them. You make her feel secure. You listen to his problems before telling about your problems. You call each other on the phone. You ask, "What do you want? What do

you need?" and then you do what you can to meet those desires.

USA Today reported an interview with best-selling author Stormie Omartian. When you hear her story you decide that her name, Stormie, describes multiple chapters of her life. Her mentally ill mother locked her in a closet for hours at a time when she was a girl. In young adulthood she got into drugs, alcohol, Eastern religions and the occult. She went through a disastrous first marriage, two illegal abortions, severe depression and contemplated suicide. Now she is a Christian having been married for over 25 years with three grown children. She explains that one of the ways she loves and cares for her husband is that she regularly prays

for him. "Something amazing happens to our hearts when we pray for another person. The hardness melts. We become able to get beyond the hurts and forgive."

The best Christian love in marriage is sacrificial, beneficial, caring and exclusive. When St. Paul finished writing his revolution-

ary words about Christian marriage he quoted a line from the beginning of the Old Testament. It's explained in greater detail by Jesus in Mark 10:6-9:

"But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

St. Paul called the marriage relationship of a man and a woman a "profound mystery". There is something special, supernatural, unexplainable, mysterious and wonderful about the exclusive relationship of Christian marriage. It is a permanent relationship specially sealed by God. In its permanency and exclusivity there can be a safety, security and vulnerability unlike any other human relationships. Here he can be who he is and be loved. She can be herself and be fully accepted and supported. Here there can be secrets that no one else ever knows—not even a court of law will breach

There is something special, supernatural, unexplainable, mysterious and wonderful about the exclusive relationship of Christian marriage. It is a permanent relationship specially sealed by God.

spousal privilege. Here I can grow and be grown as in no other place or way or relationship.

While there may be parents and children and family and friends swirling around a Christian marriage they can never fully know or understand. It is for just two people—no one else knows you like the person to whom you are married, no one else loves you like your husband or wife. There is an intimacy here that is your secret for the rest of time.

Christian love in marriage protects this exclusivity with a passion. There is commitment and faithfulness to each other that keeps everyone else outside. Whether the actual words are spoken or not there is the secret bond that says, “My heart, my body, my love belongs to you and to you alone—for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, for the rest of our lives.” This is an exclusive Christian love.

One amazing reality about this Christian love for a marriage partner is that it is not strongest at marriage and then diluted through the years of life together. It can and should grow stronger with time. When a couple first marries they beautifully profess their love and allegiance for one another—as they should! But it is only the beginning. As they journey through the varied terrain of life together, they are given the opportunity to love each other in new and different ways that they never could have been imagined on their wedding day. Paying bills, medical crises, changing of addresses, birthing chil-

dren and spending ten thousand nights together in the same bed can grow a far stronger and more wonderful love than when it all began.

Near the end of the Bible there is an obscure but very interesting line written by St. Paul. In Titus 2:4 older women are encouraged to “*train the younger women to love their husbands.*” It assumes that love grows stronger and better with age. It assumes that Christian love doesn’t just happen but that it is learned and practiced. It teaches that the best is yet to come.

Christian husband, may your love for your wife be sacrificial, beneficial, caring and exclusive.

Christian wife, may your love for your husband be sacrificial, beneficial, caring and exclusive.

And Christians, one and all:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ” (Matthew 22:37-39)

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
©Leith Anderson