

Falling in Love Again

When speaking the carefully prepared words of his marriage proposal one young man said, “I’m not wealthy and I don’t have a yacht and a convertible like Jerome Green but, my darling, I love you.” And she said, “I love you, too, but tell me a bit more about Jerome Green!”

Love is sometimes fickle. We have all heard someone explain following the break-up of a marriage, “We didn’t love each other any more. We just fell out of love.”

Love is important to marriage. Most of us can’t imagine marriage without love. To us the arranged marriages of other cultures seem almost cruel, like a terrible prison sentence. But we’re tragically mistaken if we think love is all there is to marriage. Millions of couples have believed that love was all that was necessary for a successful marriage only to discover love can wear thin in the daily realities of married life and it is not sufficient to keep a marriage together.

Love is as much a product of marriage as a producer of marriage. I would even say you really can’t experience the full blossom of love until you are well into your marriage together.

Charleen and I have known each other all our lives. We grew up together, were part of the same church, had friend in common and shared experiences. But in high school I noticed her in a new and different way. My eyes and heart were captured by this vivacious blonde teenage cheerleader. We started dating. We exchanged high school rings and “went steady”. We wrote each other notes that were signed with love. We said, “I love you.” But frankly, the affection of those teenage years seems little more than infatuation by today’s standards.

Love is more than youth and appearance. It’s a commitment we’ve made to each other for life. It’s the joys we’ve shared together, the result of years of struggling through university, seminary and graduate school. For us love is the product of the fears of being caught twice in wars and conflicts

overseas. Love was forged side-by-side praying through problems. It’s the result of battling our way out of debt together. It has grown with the joy of welcoming children into our family and the fears of late night emergency room visits. Now when we look into each other’s eyes and say, “I love you” it’s quite different from when we said it years ago.

Love is like the spinning globe with its changing seasons. Some are warm like summer; some are cold and difficult like a Minnesota winter; some are colorful and changing like a New England autumn; some are fresh and promising like a budding spring.

Every married couple must learn to hang in there as the seasons change. Marriage takes work and marriage takes time. When love grows cool and marriage is threatened we need to redouble our efforts to rekindle the fire and warm our relationship at the hearth of commitment.

USA TODAY published an interesting article

about the different seasons of marriage and what are the best and the worst times. It said:

... marital challenges alter dramatically across the decades. The least happy years are typically in the 30s and 40s, as most couples rear school-age kids. The happiest tend to

begin in the 50s and 60s after the kids leave home and then things get even better in the 70s and 80s. . . .

What do you do if you are in one of those winter seasons of marriage when the flame of love may be burning a bit low and perhaps even flickering out? How do you fall in love again?

I suppose it begins with learning to love. Let’s take a look at Titus 2:1-4:

You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.

Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good.

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Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children.

Love is not something that just happens. It needs to be learned! When I meet with couples who are anticipating marriage I ask them about the marriages they have observed and that have influenced them. Usually it's their parents' marriages. Either they want to copy their parents' marriages or they want their marriage to be completely different from their parents'.

In premarital counseling I tell couples to observe the marriages of others. Take note of the way husbands treat their wives. Are they courteous and kind? Do they open the car door or expect to have the car door opened for them? Does the wife speak of her husband in kind and loving terms or does she tend to belittle him and ignore him? Is he treated with respect? Is love characteristic of their marriage?

Learn to love by finding teachers who are good lovers. Look for couples whose love is strong and get to know them. Ask them how they coped with struggles in their marriage. Ask how they dealt with finances, how they coped with raising children, how they responded to an extramarital affair. Find out what they did and model your marriage after theirs.

Read books. Go to any Christian bookstore to find lots of books on marriage. Read biographies including *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, the biography of the marriage of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards. We are all significantly and powerfully influenced by exposure to good marriages where people are growing in love. If we surround ourselves with people we want to be like then the chances increase significantly that we will become like them.

But there's another side to this, as well. We need to avoid negative examples. I once worked for a company where the annual Christmas party was a marathon event in suggestiveness and immorality. Liquor flowed; husbands and wives switched partners. It was a sad picture of unloving marriages and the repercussions were pathetic to see. Charleen and I stayed away. We recognized that our marriage didn't need that kind of influence.

The same goes for soap operas and other TV programs. They can be a terrible influence. Many do not hold up love that is based on commitment. Instead, they teach that love is emotion without commitment and that physical sex is all that matters.

What else can we do? We can pray to love. 1 Peter 3:7 clearly shows a link between a man's marriage and his prayers. And in James 5:16 we are told that the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. This is spiritual advice for us as Christians.

If I were a secular marriage counselor and a non-Christian I might suggest to a couple who wants to strengthen their marriage that they pray about it, especially if they are religious people, because they might see it as a powerful suggestion. But as a Christian who is committed to Jesus Christ and to the teaching of the Bible I see prayer as far more than a suggestion. I see prayer as a powerful tool that God has given us. I believe prayer makes a significant difference in our lives because I believe that God hears us and answers our prayers. So, we ought to pray and pray often that the love in our marriages will be strong and growing.

Sometimes, even as Christians, we tend to pray that our spouse will change, but that's not the way to pray. Let's pray that God will help us to better love our spouse!

What is a better way to pray? Let me give you some specific examples. Ask God to help you see her beauty and to give you eyes and desires for her and no one else. The old adage says "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." You don't have to be around people too long to discover the profound truth of that! There is no absolute standard of who is beautiful and who is not. We determine that for ourselves. So, we let's pray that God will show us the beauty he has created in the person to whom we are married.

Ask God to overcome barriers that might hinder our spouse from truly loving us. We all have habits that stand in the way of us being easy to love, so pray, "Lord, change me."

We can also ask God to teach us how to love and to love through us, to make us the kind of lover he wants us to be.

These are prayers I have often prayed and, frankly, every Christian should pray—and not just occasionally but as a regular discipline. They could be among the most important and powerful prayers of any Christian husband or wife's life. Instead of assuming that love is some kind of uncontrolled emotion that just happens to us, pray for love to be the marvelous gift from God that he wants it to be.

Try the 30-day plan. Pray sincerely and fervently every day for a month that the love in your marriage will grow stronger and better. Discover the link between prayer and falling in love!

We can learn to love and pray to love but we must also decide to love. A mistaken notion in our society is that love produces commitment. When asked why they are getting married many couples will quickly say, "Because we love each other." But few human beings have the kind of love that can survive the inevitable storms that every marriage goes through. It takes more than love. Love is merely what primes the pump. It's the commitment that generates the greater love.

I used to have a 1941 Plymouth Coupe. It seldom started easily in the winter (t seldom started easily in the summer, either!). I kept a can of gas nearby to pour into the carburetor. It would get the engine running enough to engage the fuel pump and move the gasoline from the tank to the carburetor to the engine. But, if there was no gas in the engine there was no way the little gas I poured into the carburetor could keep that flathead 6 running.

It's like that in relationships, too. Love, or infatuation, initially draws us together—it primes the pump of a relationship—but it's the continuing supply of commitment that keeps the relationship going.

There are days I don't feel like being a parent. I want someone to be responsible for me rather than me being responsible for others. I would like to be a child again. But I have a commitment to four children that must take precedence. It is such a strong commitment that it controls and disciplines my fickle feelings.

The same is true for marriage. Husbands and wives make a commitment to each other. That commitment includes promises to love. When stresses is great, when feelings are unloving it is that commitment that disciplines the emotions and enables love to be strong and to grow.

Ruby Felice, 78, has been married for 54 years. She and her husband live in Ft. Worth, Texas. She was recently interviewed for a newspaper article and it was clear she understands this whole business of commitment. She said the low point of their marriage was trying to raise two quarreling chil-

dren while her husband, an oil company executive, traveled a lot. Then she went on to explain how she got through it. She said, "We never thought the marriage wouldn't go on and on." They had a commitment together.

Renewal of love begins with the renewal of commitment. Those who want their love to grow must decide to love. Those who want their marriages to be strong must decide for marital strength. When people say they have fallen out of love it is not something that just happened to them. They decided not to love any more . . . or they decided to love someone else!

If your love has been lessening, make a conscious decision. Set aside time today or soon to think it through and make a firm commitment. Decide that you will love your spouse as you have never loved before. Decide that you will have an attraction and passion for your spouse that is stronger than ever before. Decide to fall in love again. If you really commit, you will love more and love better than you have ever loved before in your life!

A wife of 25 years was in her yard one evening when the newlywed husband across the street arrived home from work. His wife rushed out to meet him, threw her arms around him and they stood for an embarrassingly long time embracing and kissing in front of their house.

The observing neighbor get the message. When her husband arrived home from work that night she did exactly the same thing. To her delight she did not receive a rebuff. Instead,

she found that this was the beginning of the renewal of romance in their relationship.

We did a survey to see what people want most in their marriages and learned that it is to get back to the courting they did before marriage or in the early years of their marriage. Couples want romance, thoughtfulness, tenderness, that very special relationship that continually says, "You are so special. I truly love you." What are those thoughtful, maybe silly, things you used to do that added romance to your relationship?

It may seem to you but for Charleen and me romance is a meatball sandwich. On our honeymoon on Cape Cod we went out late one night for

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a meatball sandwich. Since then we have revisited that restaurant on several occasions. Even now, when I want to do something special for her, I buy her a meatball sandwich. It's a reminder of our honeymoon.

Over the years it's easy to take one another for granted. We get in a routine and forget what's really special and important—the things that touch the heart and make it glad. It's even easy to hurt one another because we have learned the other's vulnerabilities.

Imagine starting all over again in your relationship. Seek to impress and do those things that please. Intentionally find ordinary and wonderful ways to say, "You are really special!"

What are three specific romantic ways of saying, "I take seriously what God calls me to do in our marriage"? Let romance be a reflection of the commitment you have made before God. You see, commitment is the solid, nutritional base for marriage, but romance adds the spice!

One big unanswered question remains: What if I am the only one who wants to fall in love again? Loving alone is hardly the ambition of many people! There are some who have at least thought, "If he would do all of this then I could love him again!" or, "I certainly hope she is paying attention because that would bring romance back into our relationship." Perhaps sadder are those who have thought, "If I brought home roses or took her out for a meatball sandwich she'd either laugh at me or get mad at me for spending the money." Someone else might think, "I've tried before and it hasn't done any good. I can't stand to be rejected or humiliated again."

The bottom line is that you can't love alone. Or, can't you? God did! 1 John 4:19 says, "*We love because he first loved us.*" The message of the gospel is that God loved us even when we didn't love him back. God was kind to us when we were sinning in his face. God pursued us when we ran from him. God was committed to us even when we wanted nothing to do with him.

God decided to love us. He made a commitment. Then he acted in accord with his decision and commitment. And he did it totally independent of whether we would ever love him back or not. He loved us into loving him! That's the greatest truth of falling in love again. Even if the other person doesn't want to love us back we can follow the example of God who loved us into loving him.

Wives, husbands . . . love as you have learned from God. Pray every day that you will love as never before. Decide to love. Commit to be the ruler of your emotions. Then, romance to love. That's how to fall in love again and that's how to get the other person to love you back!

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