

Love and Marriage

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1



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WHAT PAUL MIGHT SAY TODAY

Critiques in the Practical Theology of 21st Century Western Christendom

Introduction

Marriage is a wonderful thing, Solomon (generally considered the wisest of the wise) said, “*He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor of the Lord*” (Prov. 18:22). But in recent years, marriage has suffered a violent assault within our western culture. Christians have not been immune to this assault. Today, Western culture virtually accepts divorce as a right of passage, something through which almost everyone will pass. Wedding vows are constructed to be subordinate to prenuptial agreements with the understanding that love for one’s spouse might wane, but love for one’s money shall remain till death do us part.

This assault on marriage has intensified so that the very sanctity of this holy union, as an institution between a man and a woman, is under attack. States are passing laws to allow marriages of man with man, and woman with woman. Next, I suppose, we will see man with beast. Such is the heart of man. Is this not reminiscent of the antediluvian society, which, we are told, would reemerge before Christ’s return?

More than the world’s abuse of this sacred union, of great concern to me is the casual perspective so many within Western Christendom have assumed toward marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The world’s perspective that marriage can be donned and discarded like soiled vesture, replaced simply by pulling another garment from the hanger, has slowly crept into the Church. Over the last several decades, the divorce rate among Christians has reached a number similar to that of the world,

ranging from 33 to 42%. Some have calculated that perhaps half of all American marriages end in divorce: 33% to 50% of first marriages, 60% to 67% of second marriages, and 73% to 74% of third marriages. Of course, all these statistics are debatable, varying slightly depending upon the survey and the criteria used for the survey. But the actual numbers are not that important, the pattern is clear. There is a problem; this, no one who values marriage can deny.

A unique bond

Marriage is the first institution established by the Lord. This alone makes it special. But it is more than a tradition, more than an institution, more than a legal contract, more than a civil ceremony, more than a religious duty, more than a mere equal partnership. Marriage is to be a living, loving union, a mystical fusion in which each nourishes, cherishes, and esteems the other as they would their own selves. This truly unique bond, unmatched in all creation, is designed to transcend all other earthly relationships: acquaintances, business associates, close friendships and blood relatives—from aunts, uncles and cousins to siblings, grandparents and parents.

This takes on special meaning when we consider the visceral bond generated by the blood relationship which often provokes deference even for those relatives whom we might not particularly care for; as the colloquial observation says, “blood is thicker than water.” When we consider the even more powerful and visceral parent-child bond, this special meaning is taken to

a whole new level, for the marriage bond is to transcend even the parent-child relationship. “*Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh*” (Gen. 2:24).

Many parents and children alike fail to acknowledge this *leaving and cleaving* aspect of marriage. They fail to reverence the *one flesh* nature of this bond. As a result, parents meddle in a child’s marriage, or, conversely, a child places parents above his/her spouse. Either is a recipe for disaster. The couple is to leave their parents, to unite and become *one flesh*.

This *one flesh* aspect of marriage is hard to define, impossible to fully articulate, harder even than attempting to define love for one who has never experienced love. Simply discussing or attempting to define this unique relationship does not do it justice. Like love, but even more difficult to comprehend, this being *one flesh* must be experienced to be truly appreciated.

The wounded

Unfortunately, too many marriages never experience this mystical union of being *one flesh*. Too many marriages never achieve this unique relationship; their bond never matures, never grows to its full potential. Without this bond marriage can be a source of great sorrow. Too many marriages suffer a weak relationship; with couples painfully remaining together (at least legally) for the kids, for the church, for their reputation. Other marriages simply dissolve in divorce as each partner, typically, and casually, moves on to another. Then some, although relatively few, who have achieved this special bond, manage to fracture it, and let it fester until it also ends in divorce. Those in this category experience a loss from which they can never fully recover. This open wound

makes it very unlikely that either will, or can, rush into another truly meaningful relationship. For if their failed marriage had indeed formed this genuine bond in which they were as one flesh, dissolving it was truly like cutting off their right arm.

The Lord spoke of this same wound with Israel, His metaphorical, estranged wife. So the prophet might better understand how the Lord felt about Israel, He instructed Hosea to take an unfaithful wife that he might also experience the pain (Hosea 3:1). Hundreds of years later, even as the crowds were shouting His praise, Jesus expressed his feeling for Israel, lamenting the soon destruction of this city that was about to kill Him. Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, was near destruction and he mourned for it:

When he came near, he saw the city and wept over it; saying, I tell you, if you had known in this day, even you, the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For . . . your enemies . . . shall not leave in you one stone upon another, . . . (Luke 19:41-44)

No, the divorce of those who have truly developed this special bond can never fully heal.

What then is the key to a successful, happy marriage, to developing this special bond of one flesh? Merrill and I were married as teenagers, nearly forty years ago, and, as you might expect, we have often been asked this same question. You will have to ask Merrill for her take on the issue to get the full story. In that her part in this relationship has been far more difficult than mine; her thoughts are certainly of great value. As for me, and my analytical approach, I think I am also onto something.

The words of love

The Greek language has different words to express various aspects of what

we often simply call love. There are three specific words of interest when speaking of love and marriage. While these words have individual meanings, on some level each seems to cross paths with another so that their usage is nearly synonymous, but not quite.

The first term, although not used in the New Testament, is nevertheless, very important to our topic, for it is the means by which most relationships begin. It is the Greek ἔρως (*eros*), from which we get the English *erotic*. Eros speaks of physical attraction, infatuation, even physical pleasure. It accounts for love at first sight and that giddy feeling in the gut when you hold hands with the one of your desire.

Proverbs provides an example of how the two of these Greek words cross paths. Although the Greek Septuagint (LXX) uses a different word for love (one we will discuss shortly), the scene described crosses into *eros*.

Let your fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and be ravished always with her love (LXX Prov. 5:18-19).

This physical relationship, of course, is not the sole means to achieve the mystical union of being *one flesh*, but it is an important aspect. However, to be meaningful, a relationship must move on from *eros*. This is not to abandon it by any means, but to grow and move into other forms of love. Nevertheless, this passage reveals how important it is to keep the fire burning. The initial infatuation, or even love at first sight, is fine, and although its intensity may vary throughout the ups and downs of a growing relationship, the flame must not be left to die out.

Another Greek term ἀγαπάω (*agapao*) is commonly translated love. Its scope of meaning is, to value, to esteem, to feel or

manifest concern, to be faithful toward, to delight in, to set store upon, devotedness, affection, and benevolence. It is often thought of as the sacrificial love and devotion that is not only prevalent in marriage but in other relationships as well: a parent's sacrificial love for the children; a soldier's love for country; a friend's devotion, etc. It was this term Jesus used when he said, "*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if you have love one to another*" (Jn. 13:35). *Agapao* is the idea behind the oft quoted 1 Corinthians 13.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. Love suffers long, is kind, does not envy, does not parade itself, is not puffed up, does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And now abide faith, hope, love, . . . the greatest of these is love.

Eros and *agapao*, the burning desire and the devotional aspects of love, are vital to any marriage, but there is another love that must be encountered if a marriage is to work, if it is to reach the mystical state of being *one flesh*. This love is expressed in the Greek φιλέω (*phileo*). It is often translated as friendship. It speaks of affection, to like, to delight in, and to cherish inordinately.

Phileo can be used to express a more personal, intimate love than that of *agapao*. While, in the realm of one's less intimate relationship in society, *agapao* is the greatest love, as for personal relationships, *phileo* transcends and necessarily encompasses *agapao*. So that, it is possible to have *agapao* without having *phileo*; that is, it is possible to be devoted and sacrificially committed without harboring a deep personal affection. On the other hand, *phileo*, by definition, includes all the aspects of *agapao*. In this respect, *phileo* is a higher form of love.

This was exhibited when Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" He used *agapas*. Peter answered, "Yes Lord, you know I love you." Peter used *philo*. Then Jesus asked him a second time, again using *agapas*, and Peter answered, again using *philo*. When Jesus asked Peter the third time, "Do you love me?" he used *phileis*. Of course Peter was grieved because it seemed that Jesus was questioning his affectionate devotion, his *philos*. Then Jesus foretold of Peter's eventual martyrdom, essentially telling him: Yes, you will demonstrate your affection, with your sacrifice (*John 21:15-17*). If you recall, earlier Jesus had said, a "man gives his life for a friend (*philos*) you are my friends (*philos*) if you do what I say" (*John 15:13-14*)

Other passages use *phileo* as well, to express affection on a more personal level so as to transcend *agapee*. Paul used this term to admonish young women to love their husbands and to love their children (*Titus 2:4*). The Septuagint used it to explain: "He that covers transgression seeks love, but he that repeats a matter separates friends" (*Prov. 17:9*), and again to say, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions" (*Prov. 10:12*). And Paul used it to express God's love toward men, "the kindness and love of God

our Savior toward men appeared," which He did via *agapee* (*Tit. 3:4*). It is this term used of Jesus' affection for Lazarus, "behold how he loved him" (*John 11:36*), and for John, "the other disciple whom Jesus loved" (*John 20:2*). This term was used to tell us how "the Father loves the son" (*John 5:20*). Jesus used it to assure the disciples, "the Father loves you because you love me" (*John 16:27*). Paul warned that "if any man loves not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema. . . ." (*1 Co 16:22*). *Phileo* is also the root word for kiss.

In the negative sense *phileo* is used to express a misplaced self serving affection: the love of money, of self, of praying in the open, of having the uppermost seats, a love of one's life or family more than Jesus, and a love of the world.

In the context of marriage, *phileo* necessarily encompasses and transcends both *agapee* and *eros*. It is this term used by the Septuagint in the aforementioned erotic passage in Proverbs:

Let your fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and be ravished always with her love" (Prov. 5:18-19).

The acts of love

Although they were once in love, too many married couples wake up one day to realize they do not particularly like each other, *eros*. Their once steamy relationship had likely started with a strong, mutual physical attraction for each other. As they spent more time together, they were soon making small compromises and sacrifices for each other, *agapao*. This sacrificial devotion grew once they were married. It necessarily became even more widespread as the children entered their lives. But each had their own set of friends, neither really

caring for the other's friends. As time passed, they spent less and less time together. They began spending weekends apart, each involved in their own activities. Then they were taking separate vacations. The initial flame, with which their relationship began, had long since faded; so that now, each continually irritates the other. Slowly, and sadly, they have come to realize they do not really like each other anymore.

The likely truth is that they never did like each other. They never took the necessary time to really get to know each other in an intimate, *phileo* way. The mutual sacrifices and benevolence was encouraging. Conjugal unions were good . . . for a few years; but a cherished, soul to soul, intimate and deeply devoted friendship was never developed. For, if this all encompassing *phileo* had been present to the degree so that they were as *one flesh*, they would not likely be entertaining their present thoughts of disdain.

Unlike *eros*, *phileo* does not mystically appear at first sight. *Phileo*, at any level is a relationship that takes time and energy. At its heightened level of intimacy within marriage, its development demands even greater effort. It must be nurtured, cuddled, sought after. As Helen Rowland noted, "Marriage is like twirling a baton, turning handsprings or eating with chopsticks. It looks easy until you try it."¹

More than the love at first sight aspect of *eros*; more than the impersonal devotion of *agapao*; this special *phileo* relationship within a marriage can only be attained by perfect familiarity. Not merely physical intimacy, but an interpersonal growth that requires quality time together, learning of each other's dreams, and fears, and perfections, and imperfections, of life

before each other. As one little boy put it, when asked what a friend was: "someone who knows everything there is to know about you but likes you anyway."

Speaking kindly

Seeking to understand what caused marriages to fail; several years ago marital researchers studied couples over the course of decades; retracing the windy path of those who had split up, all the way back to their wedding day. What they discovered was somewhat disturbing. None of the factors they expected seemed to make any difference: not how in love the newlyweds were; not how much affection they showed; not how much they fought or what they fought about. What they did find was that both the marriages that proved successful and those that failed looked surprisingly similar in the early days. Then psychologists Cliff Notarius of Catholic University and Howard Markman of the University of Denver studied newlyweds over the first decade of marriage and found a subtle but telling difference at the beginning of the relationships.

Of those marriages that would ultimately succeed, 5% of the comments made about each other were insults. Of the marriages that would ultimately fail, it was 10%. As the decade passed the gap magnified until the failing couples spoke five times as many cruel and negative comments at each other as did the happy couples. They concluded that "Hostile putdowns act as cancerous cells that, if unchecked, erode the relationship over time, . . . In the end, relentless unremitting negativity takes control and the couple can't get through a week without major blow ups."²

¹ Helen Rowland, Reader's Digest, June, 1994, p. 130.

² Notarius, U.S. News & World Report, February 21, 1994, p. 67.

Such behavior is the exact opposite of love, of *agapao*, of *phileo*. Love is longsuffering, it is not puffed up, does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil, does not rejoice in wrong doing, endures all things (1 Cor. 13). “*Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions*” (Prov. 10:12).

Conclusion

This then, I believe, is the key to the successful, happy marriage. It centers upon creating a bond that is closer even than that of blood. It can only be achieved by pursuing the special intimate friendship of *phileo* at the marital level, which incorporates and transcends both *eros* and *agapee*. The result is an intimate friendship, a love and devotion so tight, so intertwined that the two are as one. But this union must be fostered. It has to be nurtured. It takes time and effort. Beyond the love-at-first-sight nature of *eros*, beyond even the obligatory sacrificial love of *agapee*, this *phileo* is a personal, deeply emotional, gut wrenching attachment from the depths of your soul that creates a bond so strong between the two they are *one flesh*.

Jeremy Taylor has said, “By friendship you mean the greatest love, the greatest usefulness, the most open communication, the noblest sufferings, the severest truth, the heartiest counsel, and the greatest union of minds of which brave men and women are capable.” And George Eliot observed,

Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person, having neither to weigh thoughts, nor measure words, but to pour them all out just as they are, chaff and grain together knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with the

breath of kindness blow the rest away.³

Merrill is my best friend. Through the years, we’ve had several jobs in which we worked together. Many times I have heard the question: “How can you work together? I couldn’t stand to be with my husband/wife that much.” Always, when I hear this, I cannot help but question (in my own mind) the depth of that particular relationship. For there is literally no one in the world I would rather work with, or be with, than my best friend, my wife. I cannot spend too much time with her. Of course we have our own interests and need our own personal time. We are as one but we don’t cease being individuals. Still, we are happiest even to spend our alone time together: she, sowing, tending her gardening or making a special treat for the grandchildren; me, composing a song, writing a paper, playing the guitar or a game of chess against some unknown combatant on the internet. And the idea of taking separate vacations, or having a desire to simply get away from each other, is completely foreign.

Aristotle once said, “Friendship is a single soul dwelling in two bodies.”⁴ This might well be said of marriage.

³ George Eliot, quoted in *Today in the Word*, July, 1989, p. 28.

⁴ <http://www.quotesnsayings.net/quotes/67969> (March 2012).