

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

and address the insecurities and doubts you have about it. In that kind of relationship, you will demand and contribute more than you give. The only way to avoid sacrificing your own joy and freedom on the altar of your need is to become the ultimate lover of your soul. He voluntarily sacrificed himself on the cross, taking what you deserved for your sins at God and others. On the cross he was forsaken and endured the loneliness of hell, but he did it all for us. Because of the loving sacrifice of the Son, you can know the heaven of the Father's love through the work of the Spirit. Jesus truly "built a nation in hell's despair." And fortified with the love of God in your soul, you likewise can now give yourself in loving service to your spouse.

We love—because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

## THREE

### THE ESSENCE OF MARRIAGE

*For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*

Ephesians 5:31 (and Genesis 2:24)

### Love and the "Piece of Paper"

I remember some years ago watching a television drama in which a man and a woman who were living together were having an argument over whether to get married. He wanted to go ahead and do it, but she did not. At one point she blew up and said, "Why do we need a piece of paper in order to love one another? I don't need a piece of paper to love you! It only complicates things."

That statement stuck with me, because as a pastor in New York City, I have heard essentially the same thing from younger adults for years. When the woman said, "I don't need a piece of paper to love you," she was using a very specific definition of "love." She was assuming that love is, in its essence, a particular kind of feeling. She was saying, "I feel romantic passion for you, and the piece of paper doesn't enhance that at all, and it may hurt it." She was measuring love mainly by how emotionally desirous she

was for his affection. And she was right that the marital legal "piece of paper" would do little or nothing directly to add to the feeling.

But when the Bible speaks of love, it measures it primarily not by how much you want to receive but by how much you are willing to give of yourself to someone. How much are you willing to lose for the sake of this person? How much of your freedom are you willing to forsake? How much of your precious time, emotion, and resources are you willing to invest in this person? And for that, the marriage vow is not just helpful but it is even a test. In so many cases, when one person says to another, "I love you, but let's not ruin it by getting married," that person really means, "I don't love you *enough* to close off all my options. I don't love you enough to give myself to you that thoroughly." To say, "I don't need a piece of paper to love you" is basically to say, "My love for you has not reached the marriage level."

One of the most widely held beliefs in our culture today is that romantic love is all important in order to have a full life but that it almost never lasts. A second, related belief is that marriage should be based on romantic love. Taken together, these convictions lead to the conclusion that marriage and romance are essentially incompatible, that it is cruel to commit people to lifelong connection after the inevitable fading of romantic joy.

The Biblical understanding of love does not preclude deep emotion. As we will see, a marriage devoid of passion and emotional desire for one another doesn't fulfill the Biblical vision. But neither does the Bible pit romantic love against the essence of love, which is sacrificial commitment to the good of the other. If we think of love primarily as emotional desire and not as active, committed service, we end up pitting duty and desire against each other in a way that is unrealistic and destructive. How these two fit together is the subject of this chapter.

## The Overly Subjective View of Love

Modern people think of love in such subjective terms that if there is *any* duty involved it is considered unhealthy. Over the years, I have often counseled with people who were quite locked into this conviction. This is particularly true when it comes to sex. Many people believe that if you have sex with your spouse just to please him or her though you are not interested in sex yourself, it would be inauthentic or even oppressive. This is the thoroughly subjective understanding of love-as-passionate-feeling. And often this quickly leads into a vicious cycle. If you won't make love unless you are in a romantic mood at the very same time as your spouse, then sex will not happen that often. This can dampen and quench your partner's interest in sex, which means there will be even fewer opportunities. Therefore, if you never have sex unless there is great mutual passion, there will be fewer and fewer times of mutual passion.

One of the reasons we believe in our culture that sex should always and only be the result of great passion is that so many people today have learned how to have sex outside of marriage, and this is a very different experience than having sex inside it. Outside of marriage, sex is accompanied by a desire to impress or entice someone. It is something like the thrill of the hunt. When you are seeking to draw in someone you don't know, it injects risk, uncertainty, and pressure to the lovemaking that quickens the heartbeat and stirs the emotions. If "great sex" is defined in this way, then marriage—the "piece of paper"—will indeed stifle that particular kind of thrill. But this defines sexual sizzle in terms that would be impossible to maintain in any case. The fact is that "the thrill of the hunt" is not the only kind of thrill or passion available, nor is it the best.

Kathy and I were virgins when we married. Even in our day,

that may have been the minority experience, but that meant that on our wedding night we were not in any position to try to impress or entice one another. All we were trying to do was to tenderly express with our bodies the oneness we had first begun feeling as friends and which had then had grown stronger and deeper as we fell in love. Frankly, that night I was clumsy and awkward and fell asleep anxious and discouraged. Sex was frustrating at first. It was the frustration of an artist who has in his head a picture or a story but lacks the skills to express it.

However, we had fortunately not learned to use sex to impress, nor to mix the thrill of the dangerous and the forbidden with sexual stimulation and mistake it for love. With sex, we were trying to be vulnerable to each other, to give each other the gift of barefaced rejoicing in one another, and to know the pleasure of giving one another pleasure. And as the weeks went by, and then the years, we did it better and better. Yes, it means making love sometimes when one or even both of you are not "in the mood." But sex in a marriage, done to give joy rather than to impress, can change your mood on the spot. The best sex makes you want to weep tears of joy, not bask in the glow of a good performance.

### Consumer or Covenant?

In sharp contrast with our culture, the Bible teaches that the essence of marriage is a sacrificial commitment to the good of the other. That means that love is more fundamentally action than emotion. But in talking this way, there is a danger of falling into the opposite error that characterized many ancient and traditional societies. It is possible to see marriage as merely a social transaction, a way of doing your duty to family, tribe, and society. Traditional societies made the family the ultimate value in life, and so marriage was a mere transaction that helped you

family's interests. By contrast, contemporary Western societies make the individual's happiness the ultimate value, and so marriage becomes primarily an experience of romantic fulfillment. But the Bible sees *God* as the supreme good—not the individual or the family—and that gives us a view of marriage that intimately unites feeling *and* duty, passion *and* promise. That is because at the heart of the Biblical idea of marriage is the covenant.

Throughout history there have always been consumer relationships. Such a relationship lasts only as long as the vendor meets your needs at a cost acceptable to you. If another vendor delivers better services or the same services at a better cost, you have no obligation to stay in a relationship to the original vendor. In consumer relationships, it could be said that the individual's needs are more important than the relationship.

There have also always been covenantal relationships. These are relationships that are binding on us. In a covenant, the good of the relationship takes precedence over the immediate needs of the individual. For example, a parent may get little emotionally out of caring for an infant. But there has always been an enormous social stigma attached to any parent who gives up their children because rearing them is too hard and unrewarding. For most people, the very idea of that is unthinkable. Why? Society still considers the parent-child relationship to be a covenantal one, not a consumer relationship.

Sociologists argue that in contemporary Western society the marketplace has become so dominant that the consumer model increasingly characterizes most relationships that historically were covenantal, including marriage. Today we stay connected to people only as long as they are meeting our particular needs at an acceptable cost to us. When we cease to make a profit—that is, when the relationship appears to require more love and affirmation from us than we are getting back—then we "cut our losses"

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

and drop the relationship. This has also been called "commodification," a process by which social relationships are reduced to economic exchange relationships, and so the very idea of "covenant" is disappearing in our culture. Covenant is therefore a concept that is increasingly foreign to us, and yet the Bible says it is the essence of marriage, so we must take some time to understand it.

### The Vertical and the Horizontal

The serious reader of the Bible will see covenants literally everywhere throughout the entire book. "Horizontal" covenants were made between human beings. We see them established between close friends (1 Samuel 18:3; 20:16) as well as between nations. But the most prominent covenants in the Bible are "vertical," covenants made by God with individuals (Genesis 17:2) as well as with families and peoples (Exodus 19:5).

But in several ways, the marriage relationship is unique and is the most deeply covenantal relationship possible between two human beings. In Ephesians 5:31, Paul evokes the idea of the covenant when he fully quotes Genesis 2:24, perhaps the most well-known text in the Old Testament regarding marriage.

*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*

There in Genesis 2:22-25 we see the first marriage ceremony. The Genesis text calls what happens "cleaving." This archaic English term (which you can find in the King James Version) conveys the strength of the Hebrew verb, which modern translations render "united to." It is a Hebrew word that literally means to be glued to something. Elsewhere in the Bible, the word

## The Essence of Marriage

"cleave" means to unite to someone through a covenant, a binding promise, or oath.<sup>1</sup>

Why do we say that marriage is the most deeply covenantal relationship? It is because marriage has both strong horizontal and vertical aspects to it. In Malachi 2:14, a man is told that his spouse "is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant" (cf. Ezekiel 16:8). Proverbs 2:17 describes a wayward wife who has "left the partner of her youth, and ignored the covenant she made before God." The covenant made between a husband and a wife is done "before God" and therefore with God as well as the spouse. To break faith with your spouse is to break faith with God at the same time.

This is the reason that so many traditional Christian wedding services have both a set of questions as well as a set of vows. In the questions, each spouse is asked something like this:

Will you have this woman to be your wife? And will you make your promise to her in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness—to live with her, and cherish her, according to the ordinance of God, in the holy bond of marriage?

Each spouse answers "I will" or "I do"—but notice they are not speaking to each other. They are looking forward and technically answering the minister, who asks them the questions. What they are really doing is making a vow to God before they turn and make vows to one another. They are "speaking vertically" before they speak horizontally. They get to hear the other person stand up before God, their families, and all the authority structures of church and state and swear loyalty and faithfulness to the other. Now, building on this foundation, they take one another by the hand and say something like this:

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

I take you to be my lawful and wedded husband, and I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful wife. In plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.

Imagine a house with an A-frame structure. The two sides of the home meet at the top and hold one another up. But underneath, the foundation holds up both of the sides. So the covenant with and before God strengthens the partners to make a covenant with each other. Marriage is therefore the deepest of human covenants.

## Love and Law

What, then, is a covenant? It creates a particular kind of bond that is disappearing in our society. It is a relationship far more intimate and personal than a merely legal, business relationship. Yet at the same time, it is far more durable, binding, and unconditional than one based on mere feeling and affection. A covenant relationship is a stunning blend of law and love.

As we have seen, modern thought does not see duty and passion to be compatible or capable of mutually stimulating interdependence. British philosopher Bertrand Russell made early-twentieth-century arguments for the expression of sexual love outside of marriage. While conceding that we should not dissociate "sex from serious emotion and from feelings of affection," he nevertheless argued that sexual activity should be marked by intense passion and romantic delight, and that can flourish only as long as it is free and spontaneous. "It tends to be killed by the thought it is a duty."<sup>2</sup> This thought is now considered common sense—

## The Essence of Marriage

namely, that love must be the response to spontaneous desire, never a response to a legal oath or promise.

But the Biblical perspective is radically different. Love needs a framework of binding obligation to make it fully what it should be. A covenant relationship is not just intimate despite being legal. It is a relationship that is *more* intimate *because* it is legal. Why would that be so?

We can begin by observing that making a binding, public marriage vow to another person is an enormous act of love in and of itself. Someone who says, "I love you, but we don't need to be married" may be saying, "I don't love you enough to curtail my freedom for you." The willingness to enter a binding covenant, far from stifling love, is a way of enhancing, even supercharging it. A wedding promise is proof that your love is actually at marriage level as well as a radical act of self-giving all by itself.

There is another way in which the legality of marriage augments its personal nature. When dating or living together, you have to prove your value daily by impressing and enticing. You have to show that the chemistry is there and the relationship is fun and fulfilling or it will be over. We are still basically in a consumer relationship, and that means constant promotion and marketing. The legal bond of marriage, however, creates a space of security where we can open up and reveal our true selves. We can be vulnerable, no longer having to keep up facades. We don't have to keep selling ourselves. We can lay the last layer of our defenses down and be completely naked, both physically and in every other way.

This blending of law and love fits our deepest instincts. G. K. Chesterton pointed out that when we fall in love we have a natural inclination not just to express affection but to make promises to each other. Lovers find themselves almost driven to make

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

vow-like claims. "I will *always* love you," we say when we are at the height of passion, and we know that the other person, if he or she is in love with us, will want to hear those words. Real love, the Bible says, instinctively desires permanence. The great Biblical love poem Song of Solomon ends with these kinds of declarations:

*"Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm, for love is as strong as death, its ardor as unyielding as the grave.*

*It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame.*

*Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away."*

(8:6-7)

When two people genuinely love each other, and are not simply using one another for sex, status, or self-actualization, they don't want the situation to ever change. Each wants assurances of enduring commitment, and each delights to give those assurances. So the "law" of vows and promises fits our deepest passions at the present. But it is also something the love of our heart needs in order to have security about the future.

## The Promise of Future Love

Years ago I attended a wedding in which the couple wrote their own vows. They said something like this: "I love you, and I want to be with you."<sup>73</sup> The moment I heard it I realized what all historic Christian marriage vows had in common, regardless of their theological and denominational differences. The people I was listening to were expressing their current love for each other, and

## The Essence of Marriage

that was fine and moving. But that is not what marriage vows are. That is not how a covenant works. Wedding vows are not a declaration of present love but a mutually binding promise of future love. A wedding should not be primarily a celebration of how loving you feel now—that can safely be assumed. Rather, in a wedding you stand up before God, your family, and all the main institutions of society, and you promise to *be* loving, faithful, and true to the other person in the future, regardless of undulating internal feelings or external circumstances.

When Ulysses was traveling to the island of the Sirens, he knew that he would go mad when he heard the voices of the women on the rocks. He also learned that the insanity would be temporary, lasting until he could get out of earshot. He didn't want to do something while temporarily insane that would have permanent bad consequences. So he put wax in the ears of his sailors, tied himself to the mast, and told his men to keep him on course no matter what he yelled.

As we observed before, longitudinal studies reveal that two-thirds of unhappy marriages will become happy within five years if people stay married and do not get divorced.<sup>4</sup> Two-thirds! What can keep marriages together during the rough patches? The vows. A public oath, made to the world, keeps you "tied to the mast" until your mind clears and you begin to understand things better. It keeps you in the relationship when your feelings flag, and flag they will. By contrast, consumer relationships cannot possibly endure these inevitable tests of life, because neither party is "tied to the mast."

Does this mean that there are no grounds for leaving a marriage, for divorce? The Bible says that there are. In Matthew 19:3, we are told some Pharisees once asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" Some rabbinical



Divorce causes  
① Adultery  
② Desertion

The Essence of Marriage

The only such violation that Jesus names in this passage is adultery. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul adds another ground—namely, willful desertion. These actions essentially break the covenant vow so thoroughly, that, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:15, the wronged spouse "is not bound."

There is much more to say about the Bible and divorce,<sup>5</sup> but this one text is sufficient to show us the wisdom of Jesus on the subject. To allow divorce for most any reason is to hollow out the very concept of covenant and vow. Divorce should not be easy; it should not be our first, second, third, or fourth resort. And yet, Jesus knows the depths of human sin and holds out hope for those who find themselves married to someone with an intractably hard heart who has broken his or her vow in these ways. Divorce is terribly difficult, and it should be, but the wronged party should not live in shame. Surprisingly, even God claims to have gone through a divorce (Jeremiah 3:8).<sup>6</sup> He knows what it is like.

The Power of Promising

Divorce is an enormously difficult experience, even today, and that is why marriage vows can still fortify us. Vows keep you from simply running out too quickly. They give love a chance and create stability so the feelings of love, always very fitful and fragile in the early months and years, can grow strong and deep over time. They enable your passion to grow in breadth and depth, because they give us the security necessary to open our hearts and speak vulnerably and truthfully without being afraid that our partner will simply walk away.

W. H. Auden expressed it perfectly in one of his last books, *A Certain World: A commonplace Book*, where he wrote, "Like

THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

schools at the time insisted that a man could divorce his wife simply if she displeased him. He could just walk out for any reason. That, however, would not be a covenant relationship at all; it would essentially be what we have been calling a consumer relationship. Jesus rejected this view, but he did not go to the opposite extreme either.

*"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, '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."*  
*"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."*  
(Matthew 19:4-9)

Jesus denies that you can divorce for any reason. By quoting Genesis 2:24, he confirms that marriage is a covenant. It is not a casual relationship that can be discarded easily. It creates a strong new unity that may only be broken under very serious conditions. But he goes on to say that these serious conditions do exist, because of "the hardness of your hearts." That means that sometimes human hearts become so hard because of sin that it leads a spouse into a severe violation of the covenant, without prospect of repentance and healing, and in such cases divorce is permitted.

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

everything which is not the involuntary result of fleeting emotion but the creation of time and will, any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely more interesting than any romance, however passionate."<sup>7</sup>

What is this great difference between a romance and a marriage of which Auden speaks? It is the signing of that "piece of paper," or walking through animal parts, or stomping on the glass, or jumping the broomstick, or whatever way your culture provides to make a solemn, public vow to which you are held accountable. Love and law go hand in hand. That's because, according to the Bible, marriage is essentially a covenant.

Why is a binding promise of future love so crucial for creating deep, lasting passion? Christian ethicist Lewis Smedes wrote an article that I read as a young pastor and a still new husband. It helped me enormously as both a counselor and spouse. It is called "Controlling the Unpredictable—The Power of Promising."<sup>8</sup> First, he locates the very basis of our identity in the power of promising:

Some people ask who they are and expect their feelings to tell them. But feelings are flickering flames that fade after every fitful stimulus. Some people ask who they are and expect their achievements to tell them. But the things we accomplish always leave a core of character unrevealed. Some people ask who they are and expect visions of their ideal self to tell them. But our visions can only tell us what we want to be, not what we are.

Who are we? Smedes answers that we are largely who we become through making wise promises and keeping them. For vivid confirmation, Smedes looks to the great playwright Robert

## The Essence of Marriage

More, whose daughter Meg pleaded with him to break the oath he had once made and thereby save his life.

MORE: You want me to swear to the Act of Succession?

MARGARET: "God more regards the thoughts of the heart than the words of the mouth." Or so you've always told me.

MORE: Yes.

MARGARET: Then say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise.

MORE: What is an oath then but words we say to God?

MARGARET: That's very neat.

MORE: Do you mean it isn't true?

MARGARET: No, it's true.

MORE: Then it's a poor argument to call it "neat," Meg. When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers then—he needn't hope to find himself again.

Since promising is the key to identity, it is the very essence of marital love. Why? Because it is our promises that give us a stable identity, and without a stable identity, it is impossible to have stable relationships. Hannah Arendt wrote, "Without being bound to the fulfillment of our promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each person's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities."<sup>7</sup> Smedes uses himself as a case study.



## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

When I married my wife, I had hardly a smidgen of sense for what I was getting into with her. How could I know how much she would change over 25 years? How could I know how much I would change? My wife has lived with at least five different men since we were wed—and each of the five has been me.

The connecting link with my old self has always been the memory of the name I took on back there: "I am he who will be there with you." When we slough off *that* name, lose *that* identity, we can hardly find ourselves again.

## The Freedom of Promising

What Auden, Smedes, and Arendt are claiming is illustrated by a painful account written by Wendy Plump of how her marriage disintegrated after she had an affair.<sup>10</sup> During an affair, she says, "The great sex . . . is a given. When you have an affair you already know you will have passionate sex—the urgency, newness, and illicit nature of the affair practically guarantee that." Here we have a perfect example of the attitude toward sex as we discussed before. The thrill of the forbidden and the ego rush of being desired was mistaken for love because superficially it made the sexual encounter crackle with electricity.

But then the affair came to light, and, she relates, her husband had an affair as well. Finally the marriage fell apart. During the telling of the story, Plump looked at her parents. "They have this marriage of fifty years behind them, and it is a monument to success. A few weeks or months of illicit passion could not hold a candle to it." Finally she asks, "If you were seventy-five, which would you rather have: years of steady if occasionally strained

## The Essence of Marriage

devotion, or something that looks a little bit like the Iraqi city of Fallujah, cratered with spent artillery?" Her parents' marriage, the "creation of time and will," was indeed more interesting than her fleeting romance, however passionate.

Some of the comments on this article, posted on the *Times* Web site, were rather scornful. The authors of the comments believed that Plump had capitulated to the oppressive traditional view of marriage as exclusive covenant. "An affair only possesses the destructiveness of a 'bomb,'" one wrote, "if you allow yourself to believe that . . . marriage is the union of two persons for life. . . . In my opinion, we need to . . . begin the long process of re-conditioning ourselves to let go of the culturally imposed obsession with monogamy." Other commenters insisted that striving for permanence through traditional marriage stifles freedom and kills desire.

But Smedes argues eloquently that promising is the *means* to freedom. In promising, you limit options now, in order to have wonderful, fuller options later. You curb your freedom now, so that you can be free to be there in the future for people who trust you. When you make a promise to someone, both of you know that you are going to be there with and for them. "You have created a small sanctuary of trust within the jungle of unpredictability," Smedes says, going on thusly:

When I make a promise, I bear witness that my future with you is not locked into a bionic beam by which I was stuck with the fateful combinations of X's and Y's in the hand I was dealt out of my parents' genetic deck. When I make a promise, I testify that I was not routed along some unalterable itinerary by the psychic conditioning visited on me by my slightly wacky parents.

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

When I make a promise, I declare that my future with people who depend on me is not predetermined by the mixed-up culture of my tender years.

I am not fated, I am not determined, I am not a lump of human dough whipped into shape by the conditioning reinforcement and aversive conditioning of my past. I know as well as the next person that I cannot create my life *de novo*; I am well aware that much of what I am and what I do is a gift or a curse from my past. But when I make a promise to anyone, I rise above all the conditioning that limits me. No German shepherd ever promised to be there with me. No home computer ever promised to be a loyal help. . . . Only a person can make a promise. And when he does, he is most free.

### Promise and Passion

How exactly is the long-term love—the “creation of time and will” produced by the promise—so superior? Wendy Plump saw that her parents had something after fifty years that was not the same as the turbocharged sexual desire of an illicit affair but was ultimately richer and deeper. What was it?

When you first fall in love, you think you love the person, but you don't really. You can't know who the person is right away. That takes years. You actually love your *idea* of the person—and that is always, at first, one-dimensional and somewhat mistaken. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Eowyn falls in love with Aragorn, but he cannot return the love. He says to her brother, Eomer, “She loves you more truly than me; for you she loves and knows; but in me she loves only a shadow and a thought: a hope of glory and great deeds, and lands far. . . .”<sup>11</sup> Aragorn understood that

## The Essence of Marriage

romantic flings are so intoxicating largely because the person is actually in love with a fantasy rather than a real human being.

But not only do you not know the other person, but the other person does not really know you. You have put on your best face (often quite literally.) There are things about yourself that you are ashamed of or afraid of, but you don't let the other person see your flaws. And, of course, you cannot show your partner those parts of your character that you cannot see yourself and which will only be revealed to you in the course of the marriage. There is an emotional “high” that comes to us when someone thinks we are so wonderful and beautiful, and that is part of what fuels the early passion and electricity of falling in love. But the problem is—and you may be semiconsciously aware of this—the person doesn't really know you and therefore doesn't really love you, not yet at least. What you think of as being head over heels in love is in large part a gust of ego gratification, but it's nothing like the profound satisfaction of being known *and* loved.

When over the years someone has seen you at your worst, and knows you with all your strengths and flaws, yet commits himself to you wholly, it is a consummate experience. To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.

The kind of love life I am talking about is not devoid of passion, but it's not the same kind of passion that is there during the days of naiveté. When Kathy first held my hand, it was an almost electrical thrill. Thirty-seven years later, you don't get the same buzz out of holding your wife's hand that you did the first time.

But as I look back on that initial sensation, I realize that it came not so much from the magnitude of my love for her but from the flattery of her choice of me. In the beginning it goes to your head, and there is some love in that, but there are a lot of other things, too. There is no comparison between that and what it means to hold Kathy's hand now, after all we've been through. We know each other thoroughly now; we have shared innumerable burdens, we have repented, forgiven, and been reconciled to each other over and over. There is certainly passion. But the passion we share now differs from the thrill we had then like a noisy but shallow brook differs from a quieter but much deeper river. Passion may lead you to make a wedding promise, but then that promise over the years makes the passion richer and deeper.

### Helping Romantic Love Fulfill Itself

We are now in a position to answer the question of how romantic love can be reconciled with marriage as unconditional commitment. Isn't romantic love something that must be completely free and uncoerced? And isn't it inevitable that intense desire for someone else simply can't be sustained, and therefore it is inevitable that we will need to seek another person who can reawaken the joy of love in us? Isn't it true that fully monogamous, lifelong marriage is the enemy of romantic affection?

No, that is not true. In fact, unconditional covenantal commitment helps romantic love fulfill itself. No one has made a stronger case for this idea than Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard.<sup>12</sup>

Kierkegaard writes of three possible outlooks on life—what he calls the *aesthetic*, the *ethical*, and the *religious*. He says that all of us are born aesthetes, and we only can become ethical or religious through our choices. So what is the aesthete? The aesthete

### The Essence of Marriage

doesn't really ask whether something is good or bad but only whether it is *interesting*.<sup>13</sup> Everything is judged as to whether it is fascinating, thrilling, exciting, and entertaining.

An aesthetic aspect is important to any life lived well and happily, but when the aesthetic dominates a life, it creates huge problems. An aesthete often claims to be a free individual. Life should be thrilling, full of "beauty and sparkle," he says. And that means often casting off the shackles of society's expectations and community ties. But Kierkegaard says that this is a very mistaken idea of what freedom is. The person living the aesthetic life is not master of himself at all; in fact, he is leading an accidental life. His temperament, tastes, feelings, and impulses completely drive him.

Looked at another way, the person dominated by the aesthetic sensibility is controlled by circumstances. If a wife loses her beautiful skin and countenance or a husband puts on the pounds, the aesthete begins to look around for someone more beautiful. If a spouse develops a debilitating illness, the aesthete begins to feel that life is pointless. But, says Kierkegaard, such a person is being completely controlled by external circumstances.

The only way for you to be truly free is to link your feeling to an obligation. Only if you commit yourself to loving in action, day in and day out, even when feelings and circumstances are in flux, can you truly be a free individual and not a pawn of outside forces. Also, only if you maintain your love for someone when it is not thrilling can you be said to be actually loving a *person*. The aesthete does not really love the person; he or she loves the feelings, thrills, ego rush, and experiences that the other person brings. The proof of that is that when those things are gone, the aesthete has no abiding care or concern for the other.

So far, Kierkegaard has shown us the limitations of romantic passion, but he is not ready to dismiss it as unimportant, not at

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

all. Nor does he pit feeling and obligation against one another, though sometimes they feel opposed to each other. He “argues that marriage actually enhances romantic love, instead of curtailing it. He argues that the ethical commitment to another person in marriage is precisely what enables the spontaneity of romantic love to achieve the stability and longevity that it [longs for but] is unable to provide by itself.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it is the covenantal commitment that enables married people to *become* people who love each other. Only with time do we really learn who the other person is and come to love the person for him- or herself and not just for the feelings and experiences they give us. Only with time do we learn the particular needs of our spouse and how to meet them. Eventually all this leads to wells of memory and depths of feeling and enjoyment of the other person that frames and enhances the still crucial episodes of romantic, sexual passion in your married life.

### Emotion and Action

How does this work itself out in day-to-day married life? Nearly everyone thinks that the Bible’s directive to “love your neighbor” is wise, right, and good. But notice that it is a command, and emotions cannot be commanded. The Bible does not call us to *like* our neighbor, to have affection and warm feelings toward him or her. No, the call is to *love* your neighbor, and that must primarily mean displaying a set of behaviors.

The feeling of affection, of course, is a natural part of love, and it can enable us to better perform the actions of love. We are never more satisfied and fulfilled than when affection and action are joined in us, when we are serving someone we delight in. Nevertheless, if we don’t distinguish between feelings and actions, it

## The Essence of Marriage

One reason we need to make this distinction is because of the sheer inconsistency of our feelings. They are tied to complex physical, psychological, and social factors. They wax and then wane, often in infuriating ways. Our emotions are not under our control, but our actions are. Most of our likes and dislikes are neither sins nor virtues—no more than our tastes in food or music. What matters is what we do with them. If, as our culture encourages us, we go so far as to define love *as* “liking”—if we only feel that actions of love are “authentic” if there are strong feelings of love present—we will inevitably be bad friends and even more terrible family members and spouses.

It is a mistake to think that you must feel love to give it. If, for example, I have a child, and I give up my day off to take him to a ballgame to his great joy, at a time when I don’t particularly like him, I am in some ways being more loving to him than if my heart were filled with affection. When you feel great delight in someone, meeting their needs and getting their gratitude and affection in return is extremely rewarding to your ego. At those times you may be acting more out of the desire to get that love and satisfaction yourself, rather than out of a desire to seek the good of the other person. As Kierkegaard observed, you may not be loving that person so much as loving yourself. And when we only do the actions of love when we are having strong feelings of love, we often love unwisely. Parents, out of “love,” can spoil their children. Spouses, out of “love,” can enable destructive behavior in each other. The reason this happens is that we are above all afraid of the displeasure of the beloved. We are afraid that he or she will be angry and say harsh things, and we cannot bear that. This only affirms that we don’t really love the person and his or her best interest. We love the affection and esteem we are getting from that person. All this means that you can indeed love, and love truly and wisely, when you lack the feelings of love.

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

So if your definition of "love" stresses affectionate feelings more than unselfish actions, you will cripple your ability to maintain and grow strong love relationships. On the other hand, if you stress the action of love over the feeling, you enhance and establish the feeling. That is one of the secrets of living life, as well as of marriage.

### Actions of Love Lead to Feelings of Love

In one of his BBC radio talks during World War II, C. S. Lewis expounded on the basic Christian virtues, including those of forgiveness and charity (or love). For the British, the world was then unavoidably divided into allies and enemies. In that situation, Lewis said, many of his countrymen and -women found the Christian doctrine of forgiving and loving *all* human beings to be not just impossible but repugnant. "This sort of talk makes me sick," many said to him. But Lewis went on to argue that, despite feelings of indifference and even contempt, you can change your heart over the long haul through your actions:

[T]hough natural likings should normally be encouraged, it would be quite wrong to think that the way to become charitable is to sit trying to manufacture affectionate feelings. . . . The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you "love" your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less. . . . [W]henver we do good to another self, just

## The Essence of Marriage

because it is a self, made (like us) by God, and desiring its own happiness as we desire ours, we shall have learned to love it a little more or, at least, to dislike it less. . . . The worldly man treats certain people kindly because he "likes" them: The Christian, trying to treat everyone kindly, finds himself liking more and more people as he goes on—including people he could not even have imagined himself liking at the beginning.<sup>15</sup>

Lewis then used an illustration that had great potency, particularly at that time:

This same spiritual law works terribly in the opposite direction. The Germans, perhaps, at first ill-treated the Jews because they hated them: afterwards they hated them much more because they had ill-treated them. The more cruel you are, the more you will hate; and the more you hate, the more cruel you will become—and so on in a vicious circle forever.<sup>16</sup>

Early in my ministry I discovered this practical insight in an unexpected way. A pastor is required to befriend a lot of people that he would never otherwise choose as friends. Doctors and counselors talk sympathetically and personally with people, but that happens within the strict confines of the office and the work week. Pastors live with the people they shepherd. They visit with them and eat and play with them, in restaurants and parks and in their homes, all the while talking to them about their life issues and problems.

As a young minister, I was immediately struck by how different a life this called me to live. Like everyone else, up till that time I had let my likings and affections strictly determine who I

spent time with. When I moved to Hopewell, Virginia, and took the church, however, I met plenty of people in the congregation that, if I had moved there with some other job, I would not have pursued as friends. It wasn't that I didn't like them; I just shared no affinities with them. There was no "spark" of the kind you feel when you want to spend more time with someone.

Nevertheless, as their pastor, if anyone needed to talk to me at 3 a.m., I was there. If they went to the hospital, I was there. If a family's son ran away from home, I got in my car and went to find him. I sat in their homes, went to their children's graduations, went to their family picnics. I shared my heart with them as they shared theirs with me. That's what it is to be a pastor, especially in a smaller church in a small town. I was called upon to do all the actions of love with a lot of people to whom I was not emotionally drawn.

And it changed me. This came home to Kathy and me one day after we'd been at the church only a couple of years. We had a mid-week day off, and were deciding how to spend it. I thought of a particular couple in the church and proposed that we visit them or have them over. She looked at me astonished and said, "Why on earth?" This particular couple had few or no friends. They had many personal problems that made them unattractive to others and indeed to each other. Kathy certainly understood the need to see them and spend time with them, but this was our day off, and surely time with this couple was ministry "work."

For a moment I was surprised by her surprise, and then I laughed when I saw what had happened. For months I had been investing much time, thought, and emotion into helping this couple move forward in life. In short, I had been doing various actions of love—listening, serving, sympathizing, confronting, forgiving, affirming, sharing. And after all that, I realized, I'd

Why did that happen? Was it because I was so holy and spiritual? No, not in the slightest. It was because I'd stumbled on to the practical principle that Lewis named. I had been loving them even when I didn't like them, and the result was that, slowly but surely, my emotions were catching up with my behavior. If you do not give up, but proceed to love the unlovely in a sustained way, they will eventually become lovely to you.

Our culture says that feelings of love are the basis for actions of love. And of course that can be true. But it is truer to say that actions of love can lead consistently to feelings of love. Love between two people must not, in the end, be identified simply with emotion *or* merely with dutiful action. Married love is a symbiotic, complex mixture of both. Having said this, it is important to observe that of the two—emotion and action—it is the latter that we have the most control over. It is the action of love that we can promise to maintain every day.

## Deciding to Love

How important is this principle to marriage itself? It is crucial. In Ephesians 5:28, Paul says, "Husbands ought to love their wives." He had already urged them to love their wives in verse 25, but here, just to be clear, Paul uses a verb that stresses obligation. There is no doubt about what Paul is saying. He commands husbands—they *ought* to love their wives. Emotions can't be commanded, only actions, and so it is actions that Paul is demanding. He doesn't care how they feel on a given day or at a given moment—they must love their wives.

Does that mean it doesn't matter who you marry, that you don't have to be in love with the person you wed, or that emotion is unimportant in marriage? No, I am not proposing that you



that, whoever you marry, you *will* fall "out of like" with them. Powerful feelings of affection and delight will not and cannot be sustained. It is quite typical to lose the head-over-heels feelings for your mate even before you get married, because our emotions are tied to so many things within our physiology, psychology, and environment. Your feelings will ebb and flow, and if you follow our culture's definition of "love," you may conclude that this can't be a person you should marry. Our culture glorifies romantic passion, and so we say, "If this was the person for me to marry, my feelings wouldn't be so up and down." In a chapter called Christian Marriage in *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes:

People get from books the idea that if you have married the right person you may expect to go on "being in love" for ever. As a result, when they find they are not, they think this proves they have made a mistake and are entitled to a change—not realizing that, when they have changed, the glamour will presently go out of the new love just as it went out of the old one. . . .<sup>18</sup>

In any relationship, there will be frightening spells in which your feelings of love seem to dry up. And when that happens you must remember that the essence of a marriage is that it is a covenant, a commitment, a promise of future love. So what do you do? You do the acts of love, despite your lack of feeling. You may not feel tender, sympathetic, and eager to please, but in your actions you must *be* tender, understanding, forgiving, and helpful. And, if you do that, as time goes on you will not only get through the dry spells, but they will become less frequent and deep, and you will become more constant in your feelings. This is what can happen if you decide to love.

This is, I think, one little part of what Christ meant by saying that a thing will not really live unless it first dies. It is simply no good trying to keep any thrill: that is the very worst thing you can do. Let the thrill go—let it die away—go on through that period of death into the quieter interest and happiness that follow—and you will find you are living in a world of new thrills all the time. . . .<sup>19</sup>

How is this transformation possible? I think it may happen something like this: When we first are attracted to someone, we think, "I want it to stay like this! I don't want to lose this passion." But as we have said, that ego rush cannot be sustained and cannot take you very far down the road of learning to love the person you really married. To use Lewis's metaphor, you must let this more immature incarnation of your love "die" if it is to rise again and live. You must stick to your commitment to act and serve in love even when—no, *especially* when—you don't feel much delight and attraction to your spouse. And the more you do that, slowly but surely, you will find your more ego-heavy attraction being transformed into a love that is more characterized by a humble, amazed reception and appreciation of the other person. The love you will grow into will be wiser, richer, deeper, less variable.

Sadly, many people never let this happen, because they have accepted the culture's definition of marriage, and when the thrill wears off, they feel it is time for a change. This view of things leaves married people very vulnerable to affairs, since it is quite natural that you will meet others who are attractive and who will hold out the promise of getting the thrill back that was there in the beginning of your relationship with your spouse.

## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

Another notion we get from novels and plays is that "falling in love" is something quite irresistible; something that just happens to one, like measles. And because they believe this, some married people throw up the sponge and give in when they find themselves attracted by a new acquaintance. . . . But is it not very largely in our own choice whether this love shall, or shall not, turn into what we call "being in love"? No doubt, if our minds are full of novels and plays and sentimental songs, and our bodies full of alcohol, we shall turn any love we feel into that kind of love: just as if you have a rut in your path, all the rainwater will run into that rut, and if you wear blue spectacles, everything you see will turn blue. But that will be our own fault.<sup>20</sup>

So when someone says, "I don't need a piece of paper to show love," you might say, "Yes, you do. If you love the way the Bible describes the love of two people who want to share their lives together, you should have no problem making a legal, permanent, exclusive commitment."

## The Bargain

In ancient times there was the bride price. A prospective husband came to the father of a woman and offered him a certain sum, depending on factors such as the woman's beauty and the size of her inheritance. We see that old practice and say, "Oh, how awful that people did that." Today, however, we have moved beyond that, and because we are more democratic—men and women do it now to one another! We look at men and women sizing each other up and say, "She's in the market" and "He got a bad deal

## The Essence of Marriage

there" and "How did she ever fall for that sales pitch?" These offhand comments are telling. We tend to size up potential partners as to their assets and deficits. And in the end we feel that we want to marry this person because he or she brings a lot to the table for us. It is almost impossible not to think in terms of how much I am putting into the marriage and how much my spouse is putting in. And if we are getting out of the relationship as much (or a bit more, we secretly hope) than we put in, then we are happy.

But as time goes on, we come to see our spouse's flaws. And if those flaws persist, and we find that we are now not getting out of the marriage as much as we had hoped for when we made our initial investment, then we begin to do what anyone in a business does. If revenues are down, cut expenditures. And so if my wife is not being the wife she ought to be, I simply will not put in the effort to be the husband I used to be. It seems perfectly fair. "She's not doing this like she used to. So why, then, should I do that? If I'm not getting the same value, I don't need to put as much into this." You tell yourself at some semiconscious level that this behavior is only fair and equitable. But it's really a form of revenge.

This is how you justify your withdrawal in your mind, but, of course, your spouse doesn't see it quite that way. If my wife sees me being emotionally more remote, not being as active in serving her needs or the needs of the family, she will feel warranted to dial back her own involvement and commitment to me. The less you feel love, and the less you act loving, the less you feel loving, and so you both spiral down and down.

Think, for a moment, how different a parent's relationship is with a child. If you have a child, you will find that the Biblical pattern of love is forced on you. Your new child is the neediest human being you have ever met. She needs your care every

This means we must say to ourselves something like this: "Well, when Jesus looked down from the cross, he didn't think, 'I am giving myself to you because you are so attractive to me.' No, he was in agony, and he looked down at us—denying him, abandoning him, and betraying him—and in the greatest act of love in history, he stayed. He said, 'Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.' He loved us, not because we were lovely to him, but to make us lovely. That is why I am going to love my spouse." Speak to your heart like that, and then fulfill the promises you made on your wedding day.

second of the day, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You make enormous sacrifices in your life, and yet the child, for a very long time, gives you nothing in return. And, while later the child can give you love and respect, never does she give you anything like what you have given her. Often older children go through long stretches during which they rebel and fall apart and need enormous investment from you and again give you nothing in return. But at every turn, whether or not they are giving to you, you give to them.

After eighteen years of this, even if your child is an unattractive person to everyone else, you can't help but love her dearly. Why? Because you've been forced to operate on the Biblical pattern. You have had to do the actions of love regardless of your feelings and therefore now you have deep feelings of love for your child, however loveable she is or not.

It is not surprising, then, that after children leave home, many marriages fall apart. Why? Because while the parents treated their relationship with their children as a covenant relationship—performing the actions of love until their feelings strengthened—they treated their marriages as a consumer relationship and withdrew their actions of love when they weren't having the feelings. As a result, after two decades, their marriages were empty while their love for their children remained strong.

### He Stayed

Many people hear this and say, "I'm sorry, I can't give love if I don't feel it! I can't fake it. That's too mechanical for me." I can understand that reaction, but Paul doesn't simply call us to a naked action; he also commands us to think as we act. "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."