

(Sex, Love & Marriage) 4. Love Is a Many-Splendoured Thing

by Zac Poonen

The Bible's concept of love is different from the world's, and believers should strive for agape-love in their relationships.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:23, Proverbs 22:3, Acts 20:35, Romans 5:5, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 13:4

Topics: "Christian Love", "Holy Relationships"

Description

Zac Poonen delivers a powerful sermon on the true meaning of love as described in the Bible, emphasizing the importance of understanding the different levels of love - eros, philia, and agape. He warns against mistaking infatuation for true love, highlighting the dangers of being influenced by worldly concepts of love. Poonen stresses the need for believers to allow the Holy Spirit to guide their relationships, ensuring that love originates from the spirit and is based on God's will. He provides practical advice on how to differentiate between infatuation and agape-love, urging young people to guard their affections and wait for God's timing in relationships.

Transcript

The word "love" is perhaps the most beautiful word in the Bible. Yet because many have failed to understand its real meaning, they have never enjoyed its many-sided splendour. Being more influenced in their concept of love by the 20th century entertainment world and by romantic literature than by the teaching of God's Word, many couples have missed the wholesome and exhilarating experience of true love.

Many a marriage has been wrecked because of a failure to understand the real meaning of love. The emotional thrill caused by the presence of some member of the opposite sex has often been mistaken for true love. Proceeding on that basis, many have married only to discover in a short while that what they considered to be love was not love at all - it was just romantic infatuation.

How often a young man "falls in love" with some girl and then, projecting himself into the place of the hero of the last film he saw (or book he read), begins to feel that if only he could marry her, they could together "live happily ever after". But marriage has a way of shattering the dream-world that an infatuated couple lived in during days of courtship and engagement. It awakens them and plants them firmly in the world of reality. If infatuation is blind, marriage is certainly an eye-opener!

True Love

We must understand what the Bible means when it speaks of "love", or else we too shall tread the pathway of failure that millions of young people and married couples are treading today.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek and that language has four words for "love" - agape, philia, storge and eros. Of these, storge is used almost exclusively to refer to the love of parents for their children and of children for their parents. Since we are dealing here with love between the sexes, we shall ignore storge and consider only the other three words. Agape, philia and eros refer to three levels of love - which could correspond to man's spirit, soul and body.

Beginning at the lowest level, eros refers to the love of physical passion. It has been defined as "the hot and unendurable desire" and has primary reference to the union of the body of one with that of the other. It is a love based on something physical in one person that can satisfy the craving of another. It is a love that always seeks to receive.

The next word is philia. This is the commonest word for "love" in Greek, and refers to affectionate regard and the love of friendship. The idea is of cherishing. It has primary reference in marriage to the union of the soul of one with that of the other. It is a love based usually on similarity of intellectual and emotional outlook. It means more than physical love but it can still be self-centered, for its satisfaction often comes from the feeling that one is wanted, or that one is a benefactor or a protector of that other needy person.

The third word - which speaks of the highest level of love - is agape. This is the love of God imparted to us by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). This word has primary reference in marriage to the union of the spirit of one with that of the other. It is a self-giving love - the love of Calvary's cross.

William Barclay in 'More New Testament Words', says,

"Agape is unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill. It is not simply a wave of emotion; it is a deliberate conviction of the mind issuing in a deliberate policy of the life; it is a deliberate achievement and conquest and victory of the will. It takes all of man to achieve this love; it takes not only his heart; it takes his mind and his will as well. It is impossible for a man to have this love unless the Spirit takes possession of him and sheds abroad the love of God in his heart."

A Greek lexicon referring to agape says,

"It chooses its object with decision and self-denying compassion. This is love in its fullest and highest form. It has its source in God. The verb-form stands for kindness towards its object and has reference to the tendency of the will."

Agapan (the verb-form of agape) itself means, "to value, to have a concern for, to delight in and to be faithful to". In reference to the love that should exist between a husband and wife, this would mean that each partner should value the other as of infinite worth; they should have a concern for each other; they should delight and rejoice in each other; and they should be faithful to one another.

The Bible defines agape thus:

It is slow to lose patience - it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive; it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. It has good manners and does not

pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good men when truth prevails. It knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen (1 Corinthians 13:4-8 - JBP).

Another definition of agape is:

"It is slow to suspect but quick to trust; slow to condemn but quick to justify; slow to offend but quick to defend; slow to expose but quick to shield; slow to reprimand but quick to forbear; slow to belittle but quick to appreciate; slow to demand but quick to give; slow to provoke but quick to conciliate; slow to hinder but quick to help; and slow to resent but quick to forgive".

In the married life of a believer, all these loves should exist - but in the proper order - agape first, philia next and eros third. This is in accordance with the teaching of 1 Thessalonians 5:23, which puts spirit first, soul next and body third. This was the order that God intended should exist in man when He created him.

In fallen man however this order is reversed, and therefore even his concept of love is perverted. An attraction of the carnal mind and body of one to the carnal mind and body of another is what this world calls "love". It is just philia and eros - and alas, sometimes eros alone. Yet in God's eyes, nothing is worthy of being called "love" unless it has the agape constituent in it.

Falling in Love

Is it right for a believer to fall in love? This depends on what is meant by the term - "falling in love". The world considers love to be an irresistible power that suddenly grips a man and begins to rule him. If, by some chance, the person who has thus "fallen in love" cannot marry his beloved, he has no alternative but to pine away in sorrow all his days - or at least until he "falls in love" again. A large number of pop songs and films are based on this theme of the disappointed lover. All this is due to the fact that the world can conceive of love only on the philia and eros level. Such a "falling in love" is obviously wrong for a believer.

For the child of God, love should commence on the agape level and should be based primarily on spiritual attraction. Thus alone should he "fall in love". He should live so totally under the control of the Holy Spirit that he is able to rule his emotions, and not allow them to run away with him. The Christian must be directed by the Spirit of God in his love as much as in any other area of his life. The Holy Spirit alone can lead you to the person God has chosen to be your life-partner - and that is the only person you should ever fall in love with.

How careful we should be then! We cannot afford to be like the unbeliever who falls in love with a person and then after some months or years changes his mind and falls in love with someone else. A believer should never be the plaything of his emotions. His love should originate in his will and not in his emotions - for emotions can be very deceptive. Feelings of love need not be absent but should follow the willing of love. But this is possible only when we allow the Cross to operate constantly in our lives, putting to death the desires of our own self and making us accept only the will of God.

Whenever you meet a person of the opposite sex towards whom you feel attracted, you must let the Cross operate ruthlessly on your natural affection, and thus keep yourself from any emotional involvement (even secretly) with her/him. Thus alone will you be in a fit state to ascertain the will of God. You must hold back the emotional involvement until after you find God's will in the matter. Otherwise you will find that your

emotions dull your rational thinking and you will eventually be misguided.

You must be careful that your emotions don't lead you into situations which you may afterward regret. It is tragic to discover after you have given your love to someone (albeit secretly) that that person is not God's choice for you. To detach yourself emotionally from him/her will then be extremely difficult. An experience of this kind causes many problems and is not easily removed from the mind. Memory has a way of bringing it up again and again even after you are married to someone else. Guilt and regret can then plague your mind thereby injuring your personality and ruining your marriage.

Young men especially have to be careful that they do not get carried away by physical beauty or charm alone. Where there is no true love, physical attraction must be kept down severely. Where true love does exist, physical attraction will not be the main thing anyway.

In this matter of love, as in other matters, the Scriptural command is,

Do not be conformed to this world....but be transformed (changed) by the (entire) renewal of your mind - but its new ideals and its new attitude - so that you may prove (for yourselves) what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2).

Infatuation and Love

There is a considerable difference between romantic infatuation and agape-love. Some may ask, "How can I know whether I really love a girl/boy or whether I am only infatuated?" Webster's dictionary defines "infatuation" as "the state of being inspired with an extravagant or foolish passion, too obstinate to be controlled by reason". The contrast between infatuation and agape love will become clearer if we consider the experiences of two Christian young men - Prakash who was only romantically infatuated with a girl, and Suresh who truly loved a girl (with agape-love). The illustrations given below would be equally applicable in the case of girls. (Many of the points of contrast between infatuation and love mentioned below have been obtained from Dwight Hervey Small's 'Design for Christian Marriage', to which I am indebted).

A Case of Romantic Infatuation

Prakash met this girl at college. She was the first girl who looked attractive to him and who seemed to respond to him. He did not know her too well, but suddenly discovered that he had (as he termed it) "fallen in love with her". It was a case of love at first sight. Of course, the girl's physical beauty and charm and a few interests that she had in common with him were the only factors that led to his falling for her. Physical beauty was undoubtedly the prime factor. He knew very little about the girl but thought he saw a few points in her that he admired. He greatly exaggerated these points and formed an idealized picture of her in his mind. He imagined her to be perfect (as no other girl in the world could possibly be) and refused to see any faults in her (even though her faults were very obvious to others). He lived in a dream-world of his own making and often felt as though he were walking on air. He felt on top of the world for he had found the perfect girl - infatuation, you see, is blind! He felt irresistibly drawn to her and he was always making some excuse or other to be near her or with her. He could not think of life without her. He avoided any discussion that might have revealed the differences and incompatibility that existed between her and himself.

Since she was the perfect girl, Prakash felt that he should show her that he was the perfect man. This made him highly artificial, for he exhibited only that part of him which he considered most attractive. He tried to show that he was unselfish and humble. But deep down, his motives were selfish for he was basically a self-centred person. This girl met a deep longing in his own heart and he really desired her only in order that he might be happy. The girl was only a means to this end. He sometimes thought about how he could make her happy, but never thought about making anyone else happy. He felt very jealous and suspicious whenever he saw her talking to any other boy in the college. He was unreasonable and expected her to talk only with him and not even with other girls. All this was because Prakash had a feeling of insecurity, caused by childhood experiences which had left him with a feeling of being unacceptable and unlovable. As a result, he lacked confidence in his ability to win and hold a girl's love. This made him expect from her a loyalty that he feared he had not won and did not deserve.

He was also in a great hurry to marry her, and as this hurry was only to haste to mate, any delay was intolerable. Problems due to lack of finance, parental objections and even sharp cultural differences stood in the way of their marriage; but Prakash, confident that love could overcome everything, shut his eyes to all these difficulties ("A prudent man foresees the difficulties ahead...the simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences" - Proverbs 22:3 - TLB). When others tried to advise him he refused to listen, for he was under the spell of romantic infatuation (it is almost impossible to make a person listen to the voice of reason when once he is under such a spell).

Then suddenly a small disagreement, caused by a misunderstanding, arose between Prakash and the girl. This angered him so much that he suddenly began to see all sorts of weaknesses in her which he had never seen before - and he told her so. His pride had been hurt and this had jolted him suddenly into the world of reality. He became disgusted with the girl and soon began to hate her too, just as Amnon hated Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-17). But Prakash was not too upset by this, because he did not care much for the girl's feelings. Besides, he had secretly been having his eye on another girl who now seemed far more attractive and "perfect".

A Case of Agape-Love

In Suresh's case, he had known the girl casually for quite some time before he felt that she was indeed God's choice for him. She loved the Lord as he did and their outlook and interests seemed to be identical. For some time he had unobtrusively observed her under a variety of circumstances and had found out all that he could about her. Love for her had grown gradually in Suresh's heart. There was no sudden, impulsive, headlong fall. There had been a calm and steady progression from casual acquaintance to agape-love. His attraction for her was based on her spirituality and her character primarily. Physical attraction had also played a part - although a minor one - for she was not one who would have won a prize in any beauty-contest. But Suresh considered her beautiful even though others may not have done so. He had tried to form a realistic picture of her, without looking at certain good points only. There was some degree of idealization; that was only to be expected. But reality was looked at squarely without fear or self-deception (agape-love, you see, is not blind like romantic infatuation).

Suresh's motives were unselfish. His desire for her was pure. He was considerate and was genuinely concerned for her and sought her welfare before his own. He did not want her for his own personal happiness. His desire was firstly that they might jointly please the Lord and secondly that she might be happy (the pathway of blessing is in giving and not in receiving - Acts 20:35). He was prepared to sacrifice anything of his own for her good. He was dedicated to her and wished to develop the potential that lay

within her. He had no desire to exploit her in any way for his own gain.

There was a spontaneity and a naturalness about Suresh even when he was in her presence. There was no artificiality. He was transparently honest and sincere.

He did not think about her alone all the time. He often thought of how he (and later on, they together) could help those around who were in spiritual and physical need. At all times Suresh kept the Lord Jesus supreme in his affections; the girl was only second. The Lord's work also took first priority in his life. He never neglected that, in order to meet her. He wanted her also similarly to put the Lord first in her life.

Suresh had complete confidence in her and there was no feeling of insecurity. He never demanded anything nor was he possessive or unreasonable. There was no jealousy or suspicion at all. The greatest proof of his love was that he did not rob her of her freewill. He gave her the freedom to say "No".

When circumstances kept them apart for a long time his love for her did not wane. It only deepened. They had financial difficulties and other problems too. They had to delay their marriage for quite some time because of these factors. Even though he was disappointed for a while because of this, yet he accepted it as from God and as ordered by Him with a good end in view. He patiently waited and prepared himself for marriage during this waiting time. He counted the cost and made every preparation for their life together. This waiting time also served to assure himself of his deep love for her and also for the fact that God had indeed chosen her for him.

He did not always agree with her on everything. But the unquenchable flame of his love enabled him to accept disagreements on matters that were not of vital importance, for he felt that these enabled them each to express their individuality.

Suresh's love for the girl was permanent. He could never think of loving anyone else.

The Contrast

In these two examples, we see the sharp contrast between romantic infatuation (often mistaken for love) and real love in the Biblical sense. Those who are infatuated may manifest only some of the characteristics that Prakash manifested - nevertheless it will still be infatuation. The case of Suresh is the picture of a perfect lover. No one may be exactly like him, yet perfection should be our goal. We should never aim at anything less.

It is possible for romantic infatuation to develop into true love in course of time, but it cannot be called agape-love until it begins to manifest at least some of the main characteristics of the latter.

Young people, in order to avoid being misled, should be able to distinguish between infatuation and love. Infatuation will wear off in a short time. Agape-love will last all through married life and will transform every duty into a delight and every obligation into a joy.

A Need for Caution

We must take to heart the warning repeated thrice in the Song of Solomon (Chapters 2:7; 3:5; 8:4), "Do not awaken nor stir up love until love itself shall please" (Berkeley Version). In other words, wait for God's time to love instead of rushing ahead into a wild infatuation.

Above all else, guard your affections. For they influence everything else in your life" (Proverbs 4:23 - TLB).

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