

## Loving Your Spouse As A Way of Loving God

Have you ever tried to put together a puzzle, without the picture on the box? The bigger the puzzle, the more difficult that becomes. Trying to relate one piece to another, trying to match shapes and colours, without knowing what the big picture looks like, can be a very confusing and frustrating experience.

For many Christians, the Christian life feels much like that. They come to faith in Jesus Christ, and it soon feels as if someone has poured hundreds of individual pieces of the Christian life into their lap, without the complete picture of how they relate. They hear about worship, discipleship, obedience, becoming like Christ, church, baptism, evangelism, discernment, prayer, and hundreds of other Christian ideas or practices. They have entered into a faith containing a mountainous body of teaching, and it can seem very daunting to try to put this massive puzzle together.

A.W. Tozer said, "One trouble with us today is that we know too many things. The whole trend of the moment is toward the accumulation of a multitude of unrelated facts without a unifying philosophy to give them meaning."

That unifying philosophy, according to Christ Himself is loving God. This is the first and greatest commandment.

Once we have embraced the idea of ultimate love for God, we face a dilemma. The uniqueness of God demands a kind of love which seemingly leaves no room for other loves. Only God can be loved for Himself.

At first, we perhaps do not grasp how radical ultimate love for God is. There is no space for love for anyone or anything else to be loved the way we love Christ. Our Lord's words drive the point home.

*"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26)*

*"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (Matthew 10:37)*

Jesus is quite simply excluding all, including those closest from us, from claiming ultimate love. Such affection is reserved for him alone. On the face of it, it looks like we must choose between two evils: "love" God to the neglect and hurt of others, or love many other things alongside God and be idolaters.

### *Answers in the Second Commandment*

And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:31)

The Lord's reply to the scribe did not end with the call to love God ultimately. He included the second greatest commandment, which he said is like the first, and together, they summarised Old Testament revelation (Mt 22:40). The ultimate love of the first commandment is not contradicted by the commandment to love our neighbours. In some way, the second commandment is a way of fulfilling the first.

The reconciling truth is that all other lawful loves form part of loving God. The Christian life is not

equally split between two loves. The second commandment falls under the obligation of the first. Understanding this enables us to relate everything back to one principle in our lives: loving God. All of the other things and activities and service and relationships we have or do will become part of one overriding priority of our lives: to love God. Subsuming the second commandment under the first will also help us keep lawful loves from becoming idols. We will learn to love the gifts of God, and the things God wants us to love, not as ends in themselves, but as means to loving God.

So how do we turn this God-centred approach to marriage?

The first thing we need to do is to let this truth purify us from idols.

We can make an idol of a good marriage. It's possible to love not your spouse, but the idea of marriage, and the idea of the love that should go with it.

Take Mary for example. Mary thought that Charles was the not only end of her loneliness, but that he would be everything to her that her father was not. Mary had dreamed of love, and certain soap operas and books fueled her ideas. When she found Charles, she knew she had found the means to her ultimate happiness. He was handsome, polite, hardworking, and enjoyed similar interests. But a few months into marriage, disillusionment began to set in. Charles was hardworking, and sometimes a bit preoccupied with his work. Not only so, but he was stubborn about certain house chores. She was shocked when instead of wanting to choose new linens, he said he just wanted to watch sport on Saturday. Mary found herself resenting, and even despising Charles. How could he be such a selfish pig? Didn't he realise he was holding their marriage hostage by his selfishness. She found herself permanently irritated at him, feeling he had disappointed, deceived, and even betrayed her. She found it easier and easier to treat him with contempt, except at those times when he got with the programme.

We can make an idol of our spouse. When your spouse is no longer a means of loving God, but has become an end for your fulfillment and joy and worship, you will pendulum between loving and hating your spouse. Your hopes and joys rollercoaster with the treatment you receive from your spouse. That makes you almost impossible to live with, because you go from needy and happy when your spouse fulfills you, and needy and miserable when your spouse does not.

We can make an idol out of being loved. John was pretty successful, and he felt some sense of accomplishment in having got to where he had. He had studied hard, gotten his foot in the door with a low paying job, but worked hard, been promoted, until eventually he launched out with his own business. It was an enormous time sacrifice, but he was reaping the benefits now. He and Susie had been married for five years, but things were not good. All John wanted was some respect. After slaving away for ten hours a day, six days a week, earning the kind of money that gave Susie a nice house, great car, and lots of little extras, you'd think she could give him some space. But when he'd get home, the first thing he'd hear was complaints about her day- how taxing the children were, how they never visit her folks, how things on the house need fixing. John found himself saying "I didn't sign up for this. I have enough problems in my life. I got married because I wanted to have a wife who'd love me, appreciate what I do for her, and give me enough space to relax in my own home! Is that so much to ask?" John couldn't see that what he loved most was being respected. His wife had become another means to that end.

In fact, there really is no limit to how many things we can turn into idols. But here is how you will know that you have turned your spouse, or your spouses' love, or your own needs, or the idea of marriage into an idol: your idols will always fail. They will promise much, and deliver little. You will exist with a sense of gnawing hunger, a sense of frustrated demands.

The reason for this is that your spouse, and marriage itself, and even marital love was never meant to bear the burden which God alone can bear. If you put anything in God's place, it will collapse under the strain, and the result will be what James describes: *James 4:1 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. (Jam 4:1-2)*

What does it mean to love your spouse for God's sake?

**1) Enjoy your spouse as one made in God's image. You love your spouse as a reflection of God.**

If your spouse pleases you only because he or she meets your wants or needs, your enjoyment will be restricted to those times when he or she does your wishes. And whenever your spouse fails to do so, or your desires or needs change, you will have a marriage of disappointment, frustration, and increasing distance. Your spouse will come to represent to you disappointment and failure.

But what if you looked upon your spouse firstly as one made in God's image. Genesis 1:26 tells us we were made to be God's image-bearers. Theologians have written libraries on what that precisely means, but we keep coming back to those things which differentiate us from the animals. Human beings are persons, who reason, and think, and choose. Humans order their world, bringing order out of what is chaotic. Humans create, and make what is meaningful.

Did you ever look at your spouse and simply enjoy him or her as a human made in God's image? Do you remember what C.S. Lewis said about the majesty of being human? He said it is a serious thing “to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. ...There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.”

If your spouse is a believer, then he or she is not only made in God's image, but is also a new creation. You can begin to see in your spouse evidences of grace. The fruits of the Spirit. Selfishness being curbed. Christlikeness growing.

I marvel at Paul's example in this regard. When Paul writes to churches where the Christians were hardly shining examples of successful, mature Christianity, he still finds evidences of grace.

*4 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, (1Co 1:4)*

You may be tempted to look at your spouse and notice that what needs to be fixed seems much greater than what God has already fixed. But at that point, remember what Jesus said about that massive plank jutting out of your eye socket, which swings around and causes everyone to have to duck when you turn your head, remember that, while you are adjusting that speck in your spouse's eye.

In the meantime, focus on the good. Enjoy your spouse as he or she reflects God in partial, and in growing ways.

**2) Desire for your spouse the ultimate good – God Himself. You love your spouse as a worshipper.**

Love is hard to define, but most people come out at something like this: it is desiring the good of the beloved. To love someone is not only to love him for what he is, and the pleasure he brings you,

to love someone is to seek his good. To love someone is to long for the greatest possible benefit to her.

So what is the greatest possible good someone can have? What is the joy or the beauty, or the glory, or the shalom that will be longest lasting and most enduring?

The answer is God Himself. The most loving thing you can do for your spouse is to find ways to urge and provoke and enable ways for him or her to know and love God more.

Do you realise that your spouse will not always be your spouse, but he or she will always be a worshipper? The time will come when your earthly bond will be broken, but when that happens, your spouse will continue to be what he or she was created to be: a worshipper, a lover of God. When God evaluates your sojourn together, will it be said that the part you played was to help your spouse become a greater worshipper?

I don't mean send your spouse to voice training. I mean finding all kinds of normal and creative ways to urge your spouse to greater spiritual growth and devotion. Family worship. Discipleship resources. Think biblically through problems. Setting spiritual goals. Discussing financial sacrifices for the Gospel. Seeking to do ministry together. Taking spiritual inventory together.

### **3) Love your spouse to please God and be like Him.**

Loving your spouse is part of loving God because God commanded you to. He tells husbands to love wives as Christ loved the church. Love them in the way Christ does and for Christ's sake. Wives, love your husbands, as to the Lord. Jesus said, if you love me, keep My commandments.

Sometimes, you will find that it's just the two of you. Two sinners in the room, and it seems there is no reason to love this person. They are not doing what pleases you, they definitely do not seem to be reflecting God. You might want there to be more godliness right now, but there is very little coming out of you, and very little coming out of them. At that moment, you love God by obeying Him.

Wife, after an exhausting discussion about his insensitive actions and lack of gentleness, all that seems to be coming back from him is stubborn self-righteousness. He is not very lovable. You don't see much of God, and you don't feel like giving him much joy in God. You are rescued when at that moment you say, my delight and hope terminates on God, not on this man. Right now, Lord, I will find joy and consolation in obeying You. You tell me to cheerfully submit, to love with respect. I do that now, not because he has earned it, or because I feel like it. I do it because I want to please you. You are the only joy left in this room, and I choose to love you, as my first love, by obeying you.

Husband, you feel like she is being impossible, and nothing you do pleases her, and the complaints do not seem to go away. Everything in you cries out to reward her with fleshly anger. There is no human in the room that will make you feel better. She is not changing, and you are not changing inside. You can run away to the TV, or to your friends, or you can please the Lord. You can say, "Lord, it's either please myself or please You. You told me to love her like Christ loves me, which is loving even when the beloved is unlovely. To please you, I will count myself dead to my desire for vindication, or my desire to be right, or to be left alone. I will seek to meet needs here, as best I can. Right now I don't have the love. But I do love You. Love her through me, as I love you."

Augustine said it this way: *"He loves thee too little, who loves anything with Thee, which He loves*

*not for thy sake.*” Loving your spouse for God's sake. Loving your spouse as means of loving God. You take that piece of the puzzle called marriage, and you look at that picture on the box. The picture says: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. So you plug marriage into that picture. And I suggest you'll find a more God-glorifying, and more soul-satisfying marriage than if you do it for any other reason.