

Loving As God Does in a Marriage

I just celebrated the 24th anniversary of my marriage to Jenifer. When we made our vows to one another at the ripe old ages of 22 and 21, we had good intentions but no clue about what true, committed love was all about.

I suspect that the word “love” is to blame. The fact that this word is used so broadly in our culture subliminally trains us to throw it around casually. I love guacamole. I love my wife. It is a travesty that the English language allows me to use the same word to characterize my enjoyment of a tex-mex side dish as I use to describe my devotion to my wife.

Ask the average married person if they love their spouse and the answer will be a resounding “yes.” Dig a little deeper and ask them *why* they love their spouse and you will hear a variety of answers, most of which deal with personal satisfaction: “She makes me feel good. She brings out the best in me. She makes me happy.” (I would say the same thing about my guacamole.) They are saying some form of, “I love what you do for me.”

Let’s be honest. This type of affection has less to do with love for the other person and more to do with love of self. “I love you for the way my life is better and richer when I am with you.” While there’s nothing wrong with that (just as there is nothing wrong with good guacamole), marital love must be called to a higher standard if it is to go the distance. Let me explain...

If you love someone because they

“make your life better,” what happens when they are no longer making your life better?

What if your husband is starting a business and is so focused on work that he doesn't have time to invest in the relationship?

What if your wife is so focused on the needs of your young children that she doesn't have the energy to give much attention to the marriage?

What if your spouse becomes emotionally disconnected because of one of the millions of things that can happen in married life?

What if somebody gets really sick and has absolutely nothing to give? Cancer? Alzheimer's? It happens all the time. Lives are devastated, and significant adjustments to life must be made. Some make them and endure. Others decide that, since they are getting nothing in return, it's just not worth the effort.

Those married people whose “I love you” means “I love how you make me happy” are the same ones who will one day lose interest and say things like: “I still love you, but I'm just not *in love* with you.” In other words, “You're not doing a very good job of making me happy anymore.” This is what love means for many in our culture. God help us.

We Must Call Love to a Higher Standard

God gives us a better picture of what true love looks like. Throughout Scripture, we see His selfless, sacrificial, never-ending, extravagant love. In the Old Testament, He showed it

to the Israelites who rejected Him time and time again. Yet He remained faithful. In the New Testament, He demonstrated his love to us through the sacrifice of Jesus.

He loves and pursues us, never giving up on us even when we ignore Him. Even when we sin against Him. He lavishly gives us His love even though He gets nothing in return for His efforts. Sure, He gets our worship, but the Bible says that the rocks will cry out in praise if we don't, so we honestly aren't all that important.

God gives us a love that never gives up no matter what we do. He gives it to us as a gift through Jesus and then He enables us through His Spirit to do likewise. "We love because He first loved us."

When you say, "I love my spouse," what are you really saying? Are you saying that you will love them no matter what you get in return? That's the love that God has for you. That's the love that He calls you to give to others. That's the love that will truly change the world.

As the family minister at my church in Atlanta, I had the chance to teach on these things a few weeks ago. If you want to hear this developed a little further, I invite you to watch the video...

Loving Like God Marriage from Barrett Johnson on Vimeo.

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