

“Above All “

“Love,” so sang a group of crooners, half a century ago, “ Is a Many-Splendored Thing, ” Christians and non-Christians are in agreement with that, although Christians would base that exclamation on a more well-founded and defensible basis than the others.

It was Paul Francis Webster who wrote the lyrics to that song that says “ Love is nature’s way of giving” and “ A reason to be living”. To be sure, we’d have to agree that love is a gift though we don’t owe it to nature but to nature’s Creator and King, the Lord God.

He designed that gift in order that people might have a very close and intimate relationship with him and, with each other.

There are those who consider love to be a fragile and elusive thing. Nana Mouskouri, that Greek diva with a most appealing voice sang,

Love is a rose but you better not pick it  
It only grows when its on the vine  
A handful of thorns and you’ll know you’ve missed it  
You lose your love when you say the word mine.

Now you and I might differ in our interpretation of these words written by a group called The Four Aces. Yet I think we’d agree that love, if it is to remain alive, must be attached to what they called “the vine”. Remove it from that source, selfishly lay claim to it and you’ll end up with no petals of love - but just a handful of thorns!

The bible, which remains one’s dependable ‘roadmap’ for life, and so, certainly for marriage has a lot to say about love. There’s a whole book of the bible called The Song of Songs or The Song of Solomon that’s all about love. Its about *eros* which is romantic, sensual and sexual love. It traces some episodes in the lives

of two lovers who treasure this gift of human sexuality that sees them very much attracted to each other, desiring one another. Yet it is also evident, especially, that they treasured *God's norms, his law* which governs sexual conduct. They did not have intimate sexual union before marriage. Time and again you come across these words, “ *Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.*” ( 2:7b, 3:5, 8:4).

Would a couple, date and subsequently marry? Would they do so having ardent expectations of happiness, joy in a bond of lasting love? They'd have to do it, God's way”. For not only eros, but also “*agape*” that *self-giving love that goes on loving*, even when the other is not so loveable is fully God's gift. *God's love, and so Christ's love is agape love*. It is Christ's forgiving, eternal love that is brimful with kindness and compassion, with justice and right. And.. it is His love on which our love must be based. It is His love that must control, direct, nurture, and grow that love of a husband for his wife. His love that is reciprocated by a loving, serving, patient helpmeet of her beloved husband.

Says the apostle John ( who was known as “ the beloved disciple”) in chapter three of his first letter,

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.  
And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

Its clear he was speaking not just about the relationship of husbands and wives but for all those who are brothers and sisters in the Lord. John goes on in chapter four of his letter to make this appeal, “ *Dear friends, let us love one another*”. And why? He answer immediately, “ *For love comes from God.*” Then he makes a most important, pivotal statement, “ *We love because he first loved us*” ( 1 John 4:19).

The world is full of love songs. History is filled with the tales of famous, or infamous lovers, Antony and Cleopatra, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton not to mention the legendary, Romeo and Juliet, Lancelot and Guinevere. Yet often

their relationships were marred by unfaithfulness. And sadly, very sadly, today love is often equated with sex and self-gratification. No wonder, for God's safe and dependable barriers, His laws for life and love which ought to be honored, are thrust aside. Mortal human beings would insist on their sinful wills. The pitiful result? Broken marriages, illicit relationships, unfaithfulness and divorces that leave a trail of unhappiness especially for the thousands of children that are left to choose sides.

Yet the bible is not confused about the love God wants to see operative in both courtship and marriage, I think of what is called the summary of God's Law. Jesus Christ himself taught it saying,

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love you neighbor as yourself ( Matthew 22: 37-39).*

I think as well of that often quoted passage of 1 Corinthians 13. There the apostle Paul says, ( and here I use the translation, in contemporary language of Eugene H. Peterson),

Love never gives up.  
 Love cares more for others than for self.  
 Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.  
 Love doesn't strut,  
 Doesn't have a swelled head,  
 Doesn't force itself on others  
 Isn't always " Me first,"  
 .... Doesn't revel when others grovel,  
 Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,  
 ..... Trusts God always,  
 Always looks for the best,  
 Never looks back,  
 But keeps going to the end.

Is this the love to which you committed yours when you said “ I do”? Is this the One True God, the Living God, who gave you His Word, that in the way of your commitment to Him, your faith and hope and love in Him, He would bless you and your wife abundantly. Through thick and thin, though trials might come? While the world is full of pitfalls, roadblocks to the exercise of genuine love and devotion?

If He isn't your God, and if His Word is as yet unknown a mystery to you, begin, by His undeserved favor a radical transformation. Begin to read His Word. Start to get to know Him and the immensity of His love. A love in which he gave His One and Only Son to die a bitter and most shameful death, on a cross for people's sins. Come to acknowledge Him as the master and director of your lives. Of your life and that of your husband, your wife, your fiancée.

There's a children's song that says, “ *Read your bible pray every day and you'll grow, grow grow.*” Its true! Millions of Christians experience that growth, spiritual, emotional, growth, growth in love and understanding, in patience and kindness and faithfulness, in the way of prayer and devotion to God.

Someone<sup>1</sup> has said, “Marriage is a great contest of generosity and wisdom, with ever higher goals attainable for the ever greater expenditure of generosity and wisdom.” You and I might agree but ask, “ What if you have little or no generosity or wisdom, to expend?” What if one's marriage has become a rather slovenly exercise dealing with mundane and unexciting problematics. A relationship in which two people now rarely see eye to eye except when shouting in each other's face?

Is there hope, even when one's marriage has become such a mess? Yes, absolutely! No, not by some quick-fix, buy-her-some-flowers and cook-him-that-favorite-pasta-of-his . Unless... these things are the consequences of *going back to the basics*. The basics of what the bible calls “ The fruits of the Spirit”: love, joy,

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. David Goodman in his To Marriage, With Love p. 59

peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” ( Galatians 5: 22) Paul says, “ Against such things there is no law”. v. 22b) If you aim at these precious things, in your conversations, ( and don’t forget, conversations involve listening, really listening to the other person) you overcome evil, ( dark, prickly things like hatred, discord, jealousy, dissections and envy - Galatians 5:21) with good. With that kind of good with which the Lord is pleased.

Then you are well on the way to capturing, or re-capturing, that many-splendored thing called love. Then you go and buy her those roses, and barbecue that steak, for you’re not grabbing the thorns anymore. Amen, and may the Lord bless your marriage.