God’s Vision of Love

Mother’s Day 2019

# Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-19; 4:22, 23; 5:1, 2, 21-33

# Key Thought: God’s vision for love in Christian relationships is beautiful.

# Intro:

Today I would like to talk about God’s vision of love for the foundation of loving relationships – especially marriage. I think I know your first thought: Duh -- that’s earth shaking. Tell me something new!!

But before we let our cynicism win – I invite you to think again and allow a helpful contrast to unfold between God’s vision for loving and what often passes for the foundations of loving in our broken culture.

God willing, I will have the privilege of performing two marriages for granddaughters of members of our congregation later this year. If they choose to go with a traditional style ceremony, I will begin something like this, reminding those gathered of Christ’s model for love.

We are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the presence of these witnesses, to join these two people together in holy matrimony. This is an honorable estate, instituted of God, and signifying unto us the mystical union that exists between Christ and his Church. This holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence in Cana of Galilee where he performed his first miracle at a wedding.

We are reminded by this section of the marriage ceremony to look to Jesus’ example to help us understand God’s vision of love for marriages and for other human relationships as well. But before we talk about God’s vision, let’s look briefly at some of the human visions for love that we are offered in our culture. The contrast will help us get a clearer picture.

# Inadequate cultural ideals for love relationships

Mutual need-meeting

Now in relationships, meeting needs is important. Often marriage enrichment times focus very profitably on this aspect of marriage.

However, the cultural idea of need-meeting usually centers on getting our own needs met. If that is the primary basis of our love, it is both selfish and shallow.

When we focus on getting our needs met, we often begin to wonder whether we are somehow being cheated and not getting our fair share. That is a recipe for trouble. When we come to a time in marriage when our needs are definitely not being met for one reason or another, the marriage is also in grave danger if it is built mostly on this basis. What if we meet someone during such a time who might be able to meet certain needs better? Should we jump ship? Many people today do just that.

Mutual need-meeting also tends to keep score. “I did this and this and this for you, but you only did this one little thing for me,” etc. But the Bible says that love keeps no record of wrongs (1 Cor 13:5). So even though all of us know that mutual need-meeting is very important to marriage, it is inadequate as a bottom-line philosophy upon which to base our relationship.

Compatibility

As a pastor, over the years I have had the privilege of talking to many couples and helping them to prepare for their weddings. One of the things I have discovered is that many of them are banking on compatibility for marriage success.

Compatibility suggests that we have found someone who fits well with us; meaning that there are some very significant commonalities in our background, interests and lifestyles. People believe that if they can just get someone whose background is like their own, whose interests are similar to theirs, whose personality is compatible with their own, then they will have true love.

Now don’t get me wrong, compatibility is nice. It helps us to find things to do together since we have some common interests. And doing things together builds relationship. Compatibility makes the wheels of daily relationships run a little smoother because our expectations of our spouse which come from the culture we were raised in are more likely to be fulfilled automatically since our spouse was probably raised similarly. If we have some background compatibility there tend to be fewer surprise hurdles in our relationship.

But both my observations and my reading have led me to the conclusion that compatibility is also overrated. People’s likes and dislikes change over time. People who begin with high compatibility don’t always stay that way. On the other hand, people who come from very different backgrounds with little in common have learned to make the adjustments needed to have very good marriages. Also, I see lack of compatibility frequently used as the convenient excuse when husbands and wives break up. Often, any casual observer could easily see that the couple had spent no time at all intentionally growing together and so they inevitably grew apart – then they say, “We weren’t compatible.” At the beginning compatibility has to do with what you bring to a relationship.

After a few years, a huge part of your compatibility is what you have created or failed to create.

The Biblical and godly concept of covenant love, of life-long marriage is meant to protect us from exiting via weak excuses like incompatibility.

Physical attraction/romance

Another inadequate foundation upon which people tend to base a marriage is physical attraction and romance. To look at the relationships of media stars in our world, you would think there was no other basis at all. Now again, we certainly try to look the best we can for our marriage relationships. Even when we go to work, we take care of our looks, because we know it affects how people relate to us. But appearances and physical attraction as a basis for our relationships are way too ephemeral and shallow. You know the saying, “Beauty is only skin deep.”

Pastors and counselors and all thoughtful people realize that the high value on appearance in our society today creates a huge amount of insecurity and anxiety beginning even with children about whether we are attractive. And even as we age there is anxiety about staying attractive. This overemphasis on appearance also results in a culture where the match-making system, if you will, bypasses many wonderful people who don’t fit the shallow exterior oriented model of the culture. In insecure marriages, this emphasis on looks creates worry about whether the one we love will meet someone they find more attractive. Now in our saner moments of reflection, and as we look at ourselves in the mirror, we recognize quickly what an unstable basis for relationships, appearance is. When we are in a marriage relationship, we know the proportionally small part that good looks play in making marriage pleasant and fulfilling from day to day. Kind words, acts of service, habits of understanding, helpfulness, generous spirit, willingness to compromise when we disagree–things like these loom so much bigger in the marriage equation.

Besides, our looks are always changing. After a few years we give up on the idea that we are becoming better-looking. For some of us that takes longer than others. And if you haven’t changed your mind yet about this by the time you turn 50, AARP will send you a magazine with a picture on the cover of someone who just turned 70 and doesn’t look a day over 40, just to keep you humble.

Seriously, thank God that he gives us a higher vision for what love is all about than just physical attraction based on good looks.

# God’s higher vision for love.

Let’s look now at the higher vision of love which God has given us and to which we are called as followers of Jesus.

A call to love based on the permanent example of Jesus:

First, we see here in Ephesians that the kind of love that should permeate all our relationships, and especially our marriages is defined by the example and teaching of Jesus. We see this in the headline prayer of Ephesians 3 that leads up to the section on marriage in Ephesians 5.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Eph 3:16-19 NIV

The kind of love that God wants to fill us is the love of Christ.

## Love with humility and gentleness

In the beginning of chapter Paul unfolds a little of what that kind of love looks like. It is not the demanding, self-assertive type.

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Eph 4:1, 2 NIV

It has the gentle, humble character of Jesus.

A vision of love that thinks of the growth of the other

In addition, later in chapter 4, Paul describes the love of Christ as “speaking the truth in love.” So, this kind of love is honest and forthright in conversation.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Eph 4:15-16 NIV

Christ-like love has as its goal the building up of the other person. I remember saying to young couples that once they are married, they become either the best friend or the worst enemy of their spouse’s self-esteem. When we are following Christ, we need to constantly be making the choice to build up one another.

We do that with small complements, noticing what the other person is good at and encouraging them in their pursuit of it. We do that by valuing what they do for us and for others. We do that by how we talk about them before others.

A vision of love enhanced by spiritual strength of character, more than by physical attractiveness.

In chapter 4 of Ephesians, Paul points out to us that God’s vision for our lives involves a transformation of character from the inside out. This transformation subtracts behaviors that are unattractive.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires. Eph 4:22 NIV

In this ongoing change, we add in positive characteristics including increased ability to love unselfishly. God’s wants for us to be

… made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4:23, 24 NIV

This powerful change in our hearts has many positive results and practical consequences. As we cooperate with God’s Spirit we become more truthful, we learn to deal with our anger, we pick up from Jesus positive communication, kindness, forgiveness and greater love for others.

The culmination of this transformation is described in the first two verses of chapter 5.

“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Eph. 5:1, 2 NIV

This reminds us that the love we learn from Jesus is a self-giving love.

A vision of love that turns mutual need-meeting on its head

So, we should not be surprised that when we read the section on husbands and wives later Ephesians 5, that the love described in a very unselfish and self-giving love.

This section on marriage in Eph. 5 always gets a bad rap in America today because the word “submit” is there and we don’t like that word. But if we would always remember to begin with v. 21 and to see the radical equality that Paul is actually bringing to the topic, as revealed by the structure of the passages, we would not be so put off by one word. The location of the chapter division does not help either for the thought section goes from 5:21-6:9.

It begins with a general statement.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Eph. 5:21 NIV

Paul then supports this general statement with three pairings of relationships. In each pairing, one side would have been completely and unquestionably dominant in Paul’s era, with the other completely subservient. The order of that era gave unquestioned authority to husbands over wives, parents over children, and masters over slaves. In each case, Paul first affirms the wisdom of the day regarding the need for submission to authority. But in a revolutionary step, Paul then balances his first admonition in each case by illustrating how in order to show Christian love, the one in the place of power should submit to the needs of the one who had no power.

“Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Eph. 5:25 NIV

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Eph 6:4 NIV

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him. Eph 6:9 NIV

When we understand Paul’s balancing arguments, then our initial objection to the word submission goes away because we realize that Paul is talking about a new concept of loving that focuses not on our needs, but on the needs of the other person. Christlike love in marriage, in family relationships and in the workplace does not think first about what I am getting out of this, but rather, how is it helping someone else. Now that is a high bar!

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Eph. 5:1, 2 NIV

[When we read Paul’s comments on slavery, we also need to remember that he is speaking into his own era. When he had opportunity, he urged slaves to become free (1 Cor. 7:21) and often he emphasized that slaves and masters were equal before God (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).]

God’s vision for our love is that it be a reflection of Christ’s love for his church.

Paul further illustrates his point regarding the quality of love that he wants us to have by referring again to Christ’s love for the church. Far from being dictatorial and self-serving, the love a husband for his wife is to be self-giving. The model for it is Jesus’ love for God’s people, for whom he freely gave up his very life.

# Conclusion:

“My Friend Rose” – story on p. 60 of Grace Givers by David Jeremiah