



## 20 **DATING** What does it take for a relationship to last a lifetime?

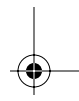
Several years ago, my husband, Bill, and I visited an elderly woman who was dying of cancer. As we rang the doorbell, I wondered what in the world we would say. We walked into the house, and we saw her in great pain, terribly bloated and bald from chemotherapy. By her side was her loving husband of more than fifty years. He had been the one who had fed her, bathed her and cared for her.

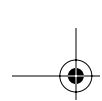
I looked at her in this pitiful state and wondered what she looked like on her wedding day. I bet she was absolutely beautiful. I don't remember anything that was said that day, but I will always remember the loving care and commitment of her husband, which continued through the last day of her life.

As I left their home and drove back to mine, I happened to drive through campus, where I saw a number of couples holding hands, some in romantic embraces. With every fiber in my body, I wanted to run up to them and say to the guy, "Will you love her forever? Would you be there for her if she were dying of cancer and her hair had fallen out?" And to the woman I wanted to say, "What about you? Will you love him forever? Would you be there for him if he were feeble and frail, too weak to lift his head off the pillow?" But of course they would say to me, "Whoa, lady! Chill out. What's your problem?"

As I continued driving, I began to wonder why some relationships start off so full of love and passion but then fizzle out. And why do other relationships continue to flourish and last for a lifetime?

Many people have asked my husband and me how we have stayed married for thirty-plus years. I would be dishonest with you if I didn't share the unseen force that has held us together: God.





My husband is a pastor and has worked with over two hundred couples doing premarital counseling and weddings. Of those two hundred couples only six couples have gotten a divorce. That's roughly 3 percent, as opposed to the 50 percent divorce rate of the general public. The staying power of these marriages is not found in my husband's great premarital counseling skills but in the couples' desire to make Christ central and learn how to draw from God's spiritual resources. But you may ask how Jesus Christ makes a difference in a marriage.

You and I were created by God. The order and design that we see in the universe points back to a marvelously intelligent Creator. God created us for relationships with him and with other people. God hard-wired us for love relationships.

#### THE MANY FACES OF LOVE

We use the word *love* in many different ways. We say,

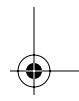
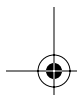
- I love those shoes!
- I love pepperoni pizza!
- I love my grandmother!
- I love my husband!
- I love the New York Yankees!

In the English language we have only one word to describe all those diverse feelings. Other languages are richer and have more words to describe love.

*Three Kinds of Love*, by Masumi Toyotome, is helpful in sorting out these different kinds of love.

**If love.** As Toyotome describes them, the first one is *if* love. This is the love we are given *if* we meet certain requirements.

- I will love you if you get good grades and bring honor to the family.





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- I will love you if you become successful and earn a large paycheck.
- I will love you if you cook dinner for me.

This kind of love is conditional and is offered in exchange for something the other person wants. It's unsatisfying because it's motivated by selfishness. Its purpose is to gain something in exchange for love. Love becomes the coin that is used to barter for what's wanted.

**Because love.** The second kind of love is called *because* love. There's a quality or condition in a person that makes them lovable.

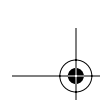
- I love you because you're beautiful.
- I love you because you're intelligent.
- I love you because you spend money on me and take me to fun places.
- I love you because you're funny and cheer me up when I'm down.

This kind of love is a little better than the *if* love that has to be earned; we just don't have to work so hard. We're loved for something we already possess. Also, it's flattering. What girl wouldn't want to be told, "I love you because you're so beautiful" or what guy doesn't want to be told, "I love you because you're so buff!"

However, fear and competition come creeping in the back door. We fear losing our lovable trait or being upstaged by someone who has more of the lovable quality. If your husband loves you because you're beautiful, what will happen as you age and younger and prettier women catch his eye? If your wife loves you because you're so wealthy, what will happen in times of financial reversal or if someone comes along who has more money?

A number of years ago, Bill and I were at a retreat for married couples. In our small group, each person was supposed to share why they fell in love with their spouse. This was one of those exercises de-





signed to help you recover your initial attraction to one another. One elderly woman said, “I fell in love with Henry because of his beautiful wavy brown hair!” She looked adoringly at Henry who smiled and returned the look of love. Then I noticed that Henry was completely bald. They were obviously still much in love. I wanted to say, “Umm, the hair is gone, so what kicked in?”

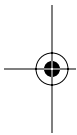
***In-spite-of love.*** I think the answer to my question is the third kind of love, *in-spite-of* love.

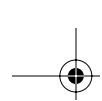
It is different from the “if” kind of love in that it has no strings attached and expects nothing in return. It is different from the “because” kind of love in that it is not brought forth by some attractive quality in the person who is being loved. In this third kind of love, the person is loved “in spite of,” not because of what he is. One may be the most ugly, most wretched, most debased person in the world and would still be loved when he meets this “in spite of” kind of love. He does not have to deserve it. He does not have to earn it by being good or attractive or wealthy. He is simply loved as he is, in spite of the faults or ignorances or bad habits or evil records he may have. He may seem absolutely worthless, and yet he would be loved as though he were of infinite worth.

This is the kind of love for which our hearts are desperately hungry. Whether you realize it or not, this kind of love is more important to you than food or drink or clothes or home or family or wealth or success and fame.”<sup>4</sup>

Most marriages are built on *if* love and *because* love. For a marriage to last a lifetime, it should ideally have no *if* love, some *because* love and an abundance of *in-spite-of* love.

Why is this *in-spite-of* love so rare? Where does it come from? We





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cannot self-generate this kind of love. It comes from God. First John 4:7 says, "Love comes from God." God has this *in-spite-of* love for you and me and everyone in the universe. God knows everything about you, everything you've ever done or said, and he still loves you completely. He'll never make some discovery about you that will snuff out his love for you.

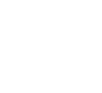
If you look at all the religions of the world, you'll find that only Christianity talks about a God with *in-spite-of* love. All other religions teach that God will love you if you meet certain requirements or because you do certain things. The ultimate expression of God's love was when Jesus left the throne of heaven and came down to earth on a rescue mission to die on the cross, so that we might be able to come into a relationship with a righteous and holy God. God wants to fill our hearts to overflowing with this love. Only God can satisfy our deep need for unconditional love.

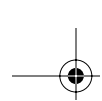
God's unconditional love has an amazing corollary. God has given people the wonderful opportunity to be channels of this *in-spite-of* love. Your life can become a pipeline dispersing unconditional love to those around you. First John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us." When we see instances of human *in-spite-of* love, that love comes from God.

In order to have love that will last a lifetime, we need to go to God daily and ask him to fill our hearts to overflowing with his love, and we also need to ask him to give us *in-spite-of* love for the people he has put in our lives, especially our marriage partners.

I wrote some thoughts about unconditional love between a husband and wife in my journal not too long ago.

The greatest thing any parent can give a child is an enduring and loving marriage. Even other people draw security from a





lifelong bond of love and devotion. Perhaps it is the mutual love of two horribly flawed people that speaks so loudly to a watching world. It would be effortless to love a perfect person, but it takes God's unconditional *agape* [in-spite-of] love to keep on loving someone who is so terribly flawed and filled with inadequacies and annoyances. Maybe it serves as Exhibit A that a flawed person can in fact be loved.

Our society communicates to us that marriage is a private matter. What happens between a husband and wife is no one else's concern. But every marriage is intended to be a living parable that illustrates God's unconditional faithfulness and love. Perhaps that's why divorces are so shattering; it has an effect not only on the marriage partners and children, but it ripples to the whole community.

**Agape love.** The New Testament of the Bible was written in Greek, and the Greek language has three main words we translate into our word *love*. One is *agape*. This is the *in-spite-of* love I've been telling you about that should be a part of every marriage.

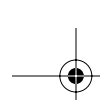
**Phileo love.** The second Greek word is *phileo*, which describes the love between two friends. To be married is to have a best friend for life, someone to share the ups and downs that life brings us. In a marriage, even the ordinary tasks of life—running errands, cooking dinner—are enjoyable because you're doing it with your best friend. Being married means knowing that there will always be someone there for you.

**Eros love.** The third Greek word for love that should characterize a great marriage is *eros*. This is the sexual love between a husband and wife. We get the word *erotic* from it.

#### SUSTAINING YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Being able to share the burdens and joys with someone who knows





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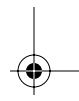
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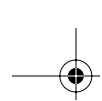
you, knows your history and will share your tomorrow is of immeasurable worth. My husband and I have a habit of asking two questions each night as we process our day. The first is, what was the highlight of your day that we can thank God for? This cultivates an attitude of thankfulness, pushes us to see the fingerprints of God in our day-to-day lives and offers an interesting window into our partner's heart. I'm often amazed at his daily highlight.

The second question is, what are you concerned about that we can take to God in prayer? This gives us permission to voice our worries to one another and gently reminds us that we are called to "cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). After this time of sharing we pray together. Not only does this keep us connected to one another, but we are continually drawing on God's resources to live. Once a week, we have an extra long time of sharing and get down on our knees and pray for an extended time. We thank God for the ways he has taken care of us, we ask God for guidance in our decisions and we seek his help for our own concerns.

Confession, repentance and forgiveness must be part of married life if it's to last. Two imperfect people will fail each other at times. Marriages that grow cold often have a long scorecard of past grievances. Being able to look your partner in the eyes and say, "I'm sorry, I screwed up. Can you forgive me?" leads to forgiveness. The cross of Christ cleanses us from sin, heals our brokenness and allows us to extend forgiveness to those who have hurt us.

If a marriage is built on romantic feeling alone, it will crumble, because feelings change. Falling in love is easy and effortless, it requires no work. But staying in love involves sacrifice and a determination to forge something. A marriage that lasts a lifetime must be based on commitment. It's a covenant between a man, a woman and God. Marriage is the commitment to learn how to love an imperfect person. In





*The Mystery of Marriage*, Mike Mason writes,

Love convinces a couple that they are the greatest romance that has ever been, that no two people have ever loved as they do, and that they will sacrifice absolutely anything in order to be together. And then marriage asks them to prove it. Marriage is the down-to-earth dimension of romance, the translation of a romantic blueprint into costly reality. It is the practical working out of people's grandest dreams and ideals and promises in the realm of love. It is one of God's most powerful secret weapons for the revolutionizing of the human heart.<sup>5</sup>

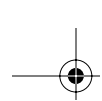
Some people seem to be good at attracting relationships. But it takes an entirely different skill set to sustain a relationship. Many people spend life moving through a series of lovers. Once the romantic love phase has worn off, they are on to the next partner.

Sometimes people ask me, "Does romantic love have to die?" My answer is *absolutely not*. There are many things you can do over the long haul to keep the romantic fire burning. One day when I was working in the kitchen, my husband, Bill, came up to me and drew me close and said in his romantic voice, "I noticed on the calendar that there's a red heart-shaped sticker on a certain date. What do you have planned for us that day?"

I was confused for a moment and looked at the calendar. Then I said, "Oh *that* red sticker! The vet gave me that to put on the calendar to remind me to give the dog her heartworm medicine." Bill was disappointed—but I made it up to him. Romantic love is an important aspect of a marriage, but not the bedrock.

If you want to have a love that lasts a lifetime, you'll need to go to God and ask him to give you *in-spite-of* love for your partner. Make a conscious effort to stay emotionally connected and spiritually con-





nected through sharing and prayer. Keep throwing logs on the fire of romance. Hang on to the truth that the God who drew you together will keep you together.

## 21 **How do I know if I should marry the person I'm dating?**

Deciding to marry someone is the second biggest decision you'll ever make, second only to your decision to follow Christ. The absolute enormity of the marriage decision is staggering. You're picking the person you could spend more than fifty years with, the rest of your life. You're picking the person with whom you might parent children. You're picking the person who will have the most influence over your life. If you feel a little overwhelmed at the prospect of making this ginormous decision, you are totally in touch with reality!

Thankfully you have a Good Shepherd who will lead you. God knows you better than you know yourself. He knows the person you're dating completely. Because God knows all, you'd be crazy not to seek his help in such an important decision.

The first step to knowing if the person you're dating is the person God wants you to marry is turning to God and asking him to show you his will. Come to God with a blank sheet of paper and allow him to write your love story.

When I was in high school, I had a guidance counselor named Mr. Snadden. I needed his signature on the bottom of my class schedule to sign up for courses. He was supposed to advise me and guide me. But I went into his office, firmly knowing what I wanted. I was unreceptive to his input and just worked him over to get him to sign. I

