

Is Marital Love Romantic?

Turn to Eph 5. First we'll talk about Song of Songs for a few minutes. Is marital love romantic? No, not in the Bible. But that is not the whole story.

Romantic Love God designed romantic love, and it is clean and wonderful. I read Song of Songs on Monday of this week. Wow! I have read it enough times before, but it is gets my attention every time.

It is a song of a man and a woman about each other, and to each other. Often they are not together, wishing they were together, but sometimes it seems that they are together, and sometimes we can't really tell.

But that song is passionate, sensual, romantic, and erotic. The man sings about the woman's feet and her legs and her stomach and her waist and her breasts and her neck and her eyes and her hair and how she smells and carries herself. And he's not just admiring, he wants to be let loose on her, take her, to enjoy her, and there is no doubt about that.

Some of the imagery is pretty weird to us: *Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon?* Men, don't try that one. But the man is enthralled with the woman's body.

And the woman sings the same way about the man: his head, his hair, his eyes, his cheeks, his mouth and lips, his arms and body and legs. And again, she is not just admiring, she wants all this, to take him to herself.

It is passionate, sensual, erotic. Their physical bodies are mentioned again and again, both the woman's and the man's. A woman's "breasts" are mentioned eight times in Song of Songs. (Not that I was counting, of course; but I could tell it was often, and looked it up in a concordance.)

What is stuff like that doing in the Bible? That we ask that question at all means we have the problem, not the Bible. God made this kind of love, this is exactly the kind of magnetism and attraction that God built into men and women.

It is not just sexual, it is longing for the whole person, but clearly includes bodies and desire. And, it is mutual, by which I mean she longs for him, and he longs for her, it goes both ways. Watch out for teaching puts most of the sexual energy in one gender or the other, or assumes that's what they thought in the ancient world.

This is the one love song that God gave us, and in this song, the man and the woman are attracted to each other, and long for each other. Neither one is reluctant or has to be won over. In our reality, that might be the case, but in this Song, neither one takes convincing.

This is totally pure and clean. When a man is attracted to a woman, and longs for her and her body in this way, that is not dirty. When woman is attracted to a man and longs for him and his body in this way, that is not dirty. They do not have their minds in the gutter.

Nothing the slightest sinful or unclean. God built this into us, and he likes what he has done, and he has not changed his mind.

As children of God, we have to manage these feelings and attractions. God has strong opinions about what we do and don't do with our desire. But the desire itself is how he made us. He's not apologizing for making us sexual beings who will desire each other this way. Why should we pretend we are not?

A few months ago I was having lunch with two mature Christian woman. One told the other about some young Christian men who pictured young women along the lines described in the Song of Songs. The other said, "these young men should get their minds out of the gutter."

So I preached to those women for 15 minutes on how God made young men, and how it feels to be a Christian young man designed like the man in Song of Songs, and have your Christian leaders to tell you to get your mind out of the gutter.

Managing the desires in God's way is hard enough on its own, without being told that they are dirty and sinful. Totally new to those women! They are both Christian leaders and good ones. All in all I was discouraged at how they thought.

At some deep level, the reason God made men and women with this kind of attraction to each other is that this is how God pictures his relationship with his people. This is how Christ pictures his relationship with his bride. Romantic love is a picture ahead of time of meeting the Lord.

We will meet the Lord in the air, and then we will be with the Lord forever, and that will begin with the wedding supper of the Lamb. Every believer is a part of the real marriage, that marriage. Human marriage is to give us an idea of the real marriage, but human marriage is not the real marriage, it is a symbol of it set up ahead of time.

This couple in the Song of Songs, all they want is each other. They don't really care where they are. That's meeting the Lord. It is not about a tropical beach or a lake in the woods or whatever we imagine the perfect place. Imagine the pair in Song of Songs. It is about meeting the Lord, who loves us like the man in Song of Songs.

We will meet the Lord in the air, and we'll be with the Lord forever, and that begins for us and him with the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Marital Love Eph 5. BUT: When God speaks to men and women about how they will treat their spouse, romantic love does not come into it.

Here's where this is going. Marital love is basically Christian love, marriage is a covenant of Christian love, by which we mean kindness, patience, readiness to forgive, readiness to serve each other, and so on. That's Christian love, and marriage is a covenant of Christian love.

The covenant of Christian love is what holds the marriage together, and what makes it work. A good marriage, as far as God is concerned, is a marriage in which there is steady Christian love. Whether or not there is romantic love does not figure in God's view of a good marriage.

When there is Christian love, romance will come and go, attraction will be more at some times and less in others. All that is fine. Romantic love is not the goal of marriage, keeping romance alive not the goal, living out the covenant of Christian love is central.

Marital love. Let's briefly review what we covered last week from Ephesians 5.

Here's what the Scripture said to wives (vv23-24): *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

Wives are called to submit to their own husbands, as submission really to Christ, to show how the church submits to Christ. Is submission to husbands unique to marriage, or is it part of Christian love? It's part of Christian love. This answer is in the line just before this:

*5:21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.* This is to everyone. All the Ephesian believers are to submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ. All of us are to submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ. It is part of Christian love.

*Php 2:3 In humility, honour others above yourselves.* This is God talking to everyone us of his children: *in humility, honour others above yourselves.* I.e. submit to one another.

In John 13, Jesus washed the disciples' feet, then said, *I have left you an example, that you should do as I have done. Wash each other's feet.* That was humble service. None of the disciples had ever washed each other's feet, or washed Jesus' feet. Now he washed theirs.

Marriage love: *wives, submit to yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.*  
Christian love: *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. In humility, honour others above yourselves. Do as I have done: wash each other's feet.* And elsewhere Jesus said, to twelve men, *whoever wants to be great among you shall be your servant.*

The marriage love of wives has already been covered in Christian love.

Let's look at instructions to husbands: Eph 5:25 *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*

Christ gave himself up for the church. This picture of husband love is pretty stark, a man being executed so his wife can flourish. That's marital love. In Eph 5:2, we have Christian love: *Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.* This is to all believers. Walking in the way of love, for all of us, is to give ourselves up for each other as Christ did for us. In John 15 Jesus puts the same thing in slightly different words: *My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

Marital love: husbands your wives as Christ loved and gave himself up for his bride.  
Christian love: love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. Jesus laid down his life for us, and commands us to lay down our lives for one another.

The other love instruction to husbands says (Eph 5:28): *Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies ... just as Christ does the church.* Marital love is that husbands love their wives as their own bodies. Christian love is love your neighbour as yourself.

God likes romantic love, he made us so it is possible. But when God talks to spouses, he does not talk about romance or that kind of attraction. He talks about Christian love.

I am saying this because in our society and in the church, marriage wrongly tends to be built around romantic love. We marry on that basis, and we leave when it is gone, and this is an offense to God.

Our society says we build relationship and marriage around romantic love. That is a huge problem. The second is like it: the church has bought into this far too much. Much Christian marriage advice amounts to ways to re-ignite romance, or keep romance going.

We go to seminars and read books on how to ignite old feelings, stir up attraction and excitement again, so romance will come back.

God is no enemy of attraction and excitement in marriage, but it is not his focus. The presence or absence of these things is not a useful measure of a marriage. And if we focus on how to stir up attraction and excitement again, what does that do for couples for whom that is absolutely not possible, too many troubles, perhaps one spouse is totally disinterested.

What God wants is that the couple would show Christian love for each other, deep and loyal faithfulness. One spouse can do that even when the other is unpleasant. At some points, every marriage is like that, and most good marriages are like that a lot.

What Jesus taught. Jesus taught two things about marriage. Real short. One, no adultery, two, no divorce. No adultery, no divorce. Of course his followers have done these things, as we have done every other thing he said not to do, things that have no business in the kingdom.

But think about this: no adultery, no divorce. When a man and woman come together: no adultery, and no divorce. This is not about romance or attraction. It's about a deep covenant loyalty: "you're the one, I'm with you, as long as we live, period." That covenant faithfulness is what Jesus wanted more than anything else to see in our marriages.

The problem with romance, of course, is not only that it fades quickly in the face of life, but that it can appear in all its wonder toward someone else. As long as Christians keep focusing on romance and attraction and excitement in marriage, we become targets for adultery and divorce.

Because, if we cannot arrange these things with our spouse, then our marriage is failing (which is not true), and then we might feel all of this for someone else! Let us not concentrate on something that is so unpredictable, something that most married people feel at one time or another for someone not their spouse.

If we assume romantic love is the highest expression of marriage love, and will carry us, we will certainly be disappointed, and we have set ourselves up for an affair, where we WILL find romantic love. Christian love, the fruit of the Spirit, is the highest expression of marital love.

### Exclusive Christian love

Marital love is not different than Christian love, except that marital love is deeply exclusive. God took one person in the garden of Eden, and divided him into two people, man and woman. When the two come together, God makes them one again.

A believing wife has many brothers in the Lord, but she is only joined to one man, and that difference shall always be clear. The strongest expression of two being one is sexual union, but it clearly is more than that. There are ways in which God is good to all people, but his relationship his own people goes far beyond that.

A man and a woman leave father and mother and are joined to each other. Genesis 2. That is a deep shift of loyalty, a new family tie. Our spouse is the new loyalty. As Jesus said: no adultery, no divorce.

An elder of the church is to be a man of one woman. That gets translated, a husband of one wife, which is confusing. It has been taken to rule out a divorced man, but then it also rules out a man whose wife died and he remarried. No evidence that either of those an issue in the NT.

But adultery was and is an issue. A man of one woman. A one-woman man. A godly man is a one-woman man, no ambiguity, many sisters but only one wife, and everyone knows it.

A godly woman is a one-man woman, no ambiguity, many brothers but only one husband, and everyone knows it. There have always been people in the church who had trouble living this way, but they shall not be leaders in the church, says the Scripture. We will treat all our brothers and sisters as real brothers and sisters, and we will also flee from immorality.

Last comment on Romantic love and Marital love

God designed romantic love, with all its attraction and desire and passion and excitement. God likes that love. But when God speaks to spouses, he speaks of not of that but of Christian love and covenant faithfulness. What can we learn from this? Two things.

One, Christian love must be the best thing we can do for romantic love. If there is a way for romance to reappear once in a while in marriage, it will happen best where both spouses live out the fruit of the Spirit, Christian love, toward each other.

Two, romantic love should not guide us or steer us. We who are married must make Christian love our goal and our measuring stick, not romantic love. No ambiguity about this. Beware of the Christian industry that promotes romantic love. That is not God's word to married people. God calls spouses to the fruit of the Spirit in our marriages, to Christian love.

Amen.

*Father, we thank you for the strength of the marriages in our church. We do struggle mightily at times, but you still work in us what pleases you. It is a great kindness from you. We ask that you will guide us all, married and single, into thinking about marriage in your ways. We ask that the Spirit will produce his fruit in every marriage partner toward their spouse. We also ask that the Spirit will produce his fruit in all of us toward each other. We put our hope in the real marriage, the final marriage, beginning with the wedding supper of the Lamb. Amen.*