

Romantic Relationships and Imperfect Love

Message from Bruce Stevens, Gungahlin Uniting Church, 24th January 2021

Prayer: O God, we acknowledge that You in your Trinity of relationships, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are perfect, but our relationships remain imperfect. Guide us to a better understanding of what to expect and how to love those closest to us. Amen

A Difficult Passage

1 Corinthians 7: 25-31 “Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life and I would spare you that. I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as if they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as if they had no dealings with it. For the present form of the world is passing away.”

Sometimes the lectionary gives us a text that is so extraordinary that any sane preacher would run a mile and choose something else. Perhaps my sanity might be questioned but I am drawn to such difficult texts. St Paul is giving advice in a fit of some apocalyptic enthusiasm. He is literally ‘God possessed’ (en theos from the Greek). He experiences the Kingdom of God is very near and concludes that Jesus is about to return in glory to disrupt the normal way of life of his congregation. The key to understanding the passage is the final sentence, “For the present form of this world is passing away.” (1 Cor 7:31)

In this passage he first addresses virgins but his advice is qualified “I have no command of the Lord but I give my opinion” (7:25). His advice was to “remain as you are”. We need to understand something of the cultural context of the congregation Paul was addressing, virgins were older women who had never married and had a role in the church not unlike we would consider the Ministry of deacons and elders in Uniting Church. But to each group Paul gives the same advice: don’t change the time is too short for any distraction. Remain single, stay married but be focused on things of God, have possessions that act as if you had none, it is as if nothing really matters because the return of our Lord is very near. If St Paul was to visit this congregation in Gungahlin in about 2000 years after he wrote his letter, do you think you would be surprised that Jesus had not yet returned in glory? Of course. Would his advice still be the same? Unlikely.

There is an astonishing sentence in the midst of this passage to which I would like to draw your attention. Paul says, “Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.” (1 Cor 7: 28). This is Paul the realist? Pessimist? Cynic? Misogynist? Marriage is perhaps the greatest intimacy we can enjoy with another person and Paul summarises it as “distress in this life” and best avoided. Now I’m sure our experiences differ: some would agree marriage is a huge disappointment, but others have experienced high points of joy which make everything worthwhile and perhaps children as a bonus, but all of us have to make some sense what Paul is about since he has fashioned the Christian ideal of marriage more than anyone else in history.

1. Is there a Biblical Pattern of Marriage?

Think about the oft cited verses of St Paul, “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, his body and he is himself its saviour so that wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:21-28). This bristles with problems when we think about the diversity of relationships in our day. How might such principles might transfer to same-sex marriages? Can this be a guide for de facto relationships? It has also been the justification for countless abusive relationships in Christian circles, and such misunderstandings have been ‘called out’ by thoughtful biblical scholars in recent years. But even if we were to try to take the principles to heart how would Christian couples handle a different understanding of relationships in our culture?

But for the moment, let’s assume this traditional marriage model. There are two principles:

- (a) Wives are to submit to their husband.
- (b) Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church.

The expectation that one gender should be subject to the other, while accepted for many centuries, is rejected by most people and since I’m not suicidal, I will not recommend any return to such ideas. I would simply observe that a pattern of submission can avoid a lot of overt conflict, it does not matter whether it’s a male or female being submissive. Of course, this is a pseudo-solution since the conflict doesn’t disappear, it is driven underground in the relationship. But, in principle, it is at least possible. If anything can be advised, it would be to avoid rigidity in who makes the final decision, since some flexibility indicates a healthy give-and-take relationship.

The expectation placed on husbands to love their wives seems reasonable. Indeed, most couples these days would expect to share a mutual love. Remember that in biblical times marriages were arranged, so almost everybody had to learn to love their spouse. The difficulty is in the second part of the sentence “as Christ loved the church”. This presents an image of radical self-sacrifice, even to the point of death, which I imagine has limited appeal. We prefer the ideal of love, but not to the point of sacrificing our lives. But this is exactly what Paul is suggesting.

So, there is a profound difficulty at the heart of Paul’s teaching. Neither submission or radical self-sacrifice has many takers, whether we have a Christian allegiance or not. And even those conservative Bible Christians who ‘sign up’ for this biblical pattern of marriage find the ideals impossible to put into practice. Yes, we can give love but it is always imperfect love. No matter what we intended in saying our vows or making a commitment, our love is always limited. The philosopher said that reality is what we stub our toe against, well this is a rock for all our good intentions in relation to committed relationships.

The romantic ideal is expressed by Juliet to Romeo: “My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love is deep; the more I give to the more I have, for both the infinite.” (Act two, Scene 2). Of course, this reflects the ‘sprint’ of couples who have just fallen in love, and not the ‘marathon’ most of us sign up for in marriage.

2. Two Principles for Fallible Lovers

The Bible is realistic about our fallibility. You might think of it as self-centredness or sinfulness but the reality is undeniable and highly relevant to intimate relationships. The difficulty is ideal driven expectations about relationships. The more we expect, the more disappointed we become.

Ultimately just frustrated and angry (perhaps the Buddhists got that right!).

I have spent thousands of hours in relationship counselling as a psychologist. My most frequent phrase to couples is that being in a relationship is “a commitment of two fallible people”. I try to be realistic. I know from clinical experience that many, if not most relationships, lead to profound disappointment. We are approaching a 50% failure rate for marriage and many people who remain married, are miserably unhappy.

The challenge we face today is to come up with relevant principles that might apply equally to Christian and non-Christian couples. In this sermon I will recklessly take up the challenge and offer some guidance for fallible lovers.

(a) Realistically assess your expectations for an intimate relationship. You might be in a de facto relationship, recently engaged (as I am) or married perhaps for many decades. How much have your expectations been informed by Hollywood rather than the Bible? Take responsibility for your expectations as they may have contributed to much unhappiness on your side of the relationship.

As a practical exercise you might consider watching a classic Hollywood romance movie [Pretty Woman and Sleepless in Seattle come to mind] and discuss how realistic the expectations of love are in the movie. Do you share any of the assumptions?

(b) Practice radical acceptance. The Bible says “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). While I think this is generally true it is especially relevant to committed relationships. Radical acceptance is often associated with a practice of mindfulness and is seen in the recent Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. This therapy promotes not only acceptance but living in a way consistent with personal values (google for further details, and see Russ Harris The Happiness Trap). We can actively try to extend our range of acceptance in a relationship. This is of course not a ‘blank cheque’ since at no time should we accept domestic violence or emotional abuse. If this is that is what you are facing, please talk to your GP and consider talking to a professional counsellor.

And now for a third principle:

3. Self-definition with Emotional Connection

Many unhappy relationships end up either emotionally cut off or enmeshed with out-of-control conflict. While these two extremes tend to look very different, in psychological terms they are very similar. Leo Tolstoy opened his novel Anna Karenina “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” I disagree: Unhappy families have very similar qualities leading to either cold divisions or heated cycles of reactivity.

Let’s investigate this further. Self-definition is clearly communicating what is of most concern to you in a relationship. At best this is calmly assertive. Let me illustrate this with an example of a relationship problem which I’ve seen many times in clinical practice. Mary and John have been married for 20 years and mostly it has been a stable and satisfying relationship. But Mary attended business conference, became somewhat intoxicated and had a one-night-stand with a colleague which she regretted the next day. She told John about this encounter and they both presented for

counselling. In my experience about half of marriages in this situation will separate, but John wanted to acknowledge 20 good years and the responsibility of raising children. How does he maintain a balance of self-definition and connection? He can say, "I love you Mary but this is completely unacceptable behaviour. If there is any further infidelity I will not hesitate to separate and shift our relationship to co-parenting our two children. However, I want to acknowledge what we've built together and that it is worthy of another chance. I'm prepared to try counselling for six sessions and see where we stand a month or two."

You may or may not agree with John and his position in dealing with this relationship problem. I'm simply using this as an example of John being clear about what is important to him in the relationship [not tolerating infidelity, recognising the good aspects about the marriage, and be willing to work on facing issues]. Equally he could have decided that the marriage was over and he wanted to work on being good parents to the children. This is still self-definition with connection but not with the goal of saving the marriage. What I'm underlining is the actual principle involved and I think it's widely applicable. Remember that the principal of connection is to avoid emotional cut-offs or being enmeshed with high reactivity.

Conclusion

There are many challenges facing contemporary relationships. We don't need formulas but we do need to rethink as Christians how we do committed relationships. Too often taken texts and turned them into formulas. This comes with a risk of being overly simplistic and ultimately impractical. Now for a final thought:

The Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck (d. 1949) was out for a walk and he came to a garden. He stopped to admire it. While he was there an old lady stopped near him. She was white-haired and gnarled with age. He said hello and asked her whether she was admiring the flowers. She said, "Yes, they are marvellous, and the whole garden is beautiful and refreshing to my spirit." She came up to his side and began a detailed description of the harmony of colours and shapes of each and every type of flower in the garden. It was a most vivid description corresponding to what he could see. When she finished, she looked up at him and that was when he noticed that she was blind. He was amazed, and then curious, "How did you manage to describe the colour and the location of the flowers?" She answered that it was from memory and from love. From the time that she could see, she took the time to look at the beauties of nature as if she would never see them again. The perfumes in the summer air now told her which flowers are in bloom.

I have no doubt that for almost every couple there was a time in which 'their garden' was in full bloom. It is appropriate to remember such good times since they can see you through the hard times. But also think about how best to maintain that garden and the principles to ensure the flowers keep blooming. Accept that we love imperfectly but mostly to the best of our ability.

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