

October 17, 2004

Luke 7:4-47
Proverbs 10:12
Song of Songs 2:2-13; 8:6-7
Galatians 5:16-25

SOME LOVE PASSAGES IN THE BIBLE

The Bible is about real life, and real people trying to live it. The featured players in the Bible are trying to do so in awareness of God and the many unseen dimensions going on all around us. They desire to be faithful and obedient to the God who has revealed himself to them in some way, usually on many levels – individually, in community, in covenant. One of the strangest of the unseen dimensions – one that touches nearly all of us in some way, at least from time to time – is the dimension of love. Some people act surprised when I refer to love as one of the unseen dimensions. We often talk about love as if it were normal or familiar, or even as if we could control it – that is, step into it or out of it at will. So why would I refer to it as if it were from the “beyond” – a spiritual and mysterious force unconfined and uncontrolled by this physical, natural realm? I would because it is. Have you ever *seen* love? You may have seen some things you thought were its results, its symptoms, its trademark, or its aftereffects. But none of us have ever *seen* love. Some of us have felt it, coming and going. It has changed the lives of many of us, on numerous levels. The New Testament thinks it is the most powerful motive force in the world, even transformational. Clearly Jesus trusts it – and the God who is its source – enough to base His whole life and ministry on it. All His other powers, which are considerable, seem to be coming from and taking their energy from this unseen source.

Two people sit in our midst this morning who claim to be in love; they claim to love each other. But are they simple-minded enough to think this was their idea? Do they imagine that they invented this miracle that now surrounds them and is even now changing and transforming their lives? Do they comfort themselves with the illusion that they can turn it off or on at will? If they turn away from it, which they can do (we are given free will), will it not warp and shrivel their lives as they reject this gift from beyond, this destiny, this power that comes from God? I will let you ask them such questions, if you wish, after the service.

But most of you need not ask. The Spirit has tried to bless your life with love from time to time also. Love comes in many forms. Nevertheless, most of us know that the loss of love is one of the most painful experiences on the face of the earth. This despite the fact that we cannot see it,

cannot measure it, cannot even prove that it exists. That's because it comes from the unseen God, who himself loves us and who revealed this love most and best in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Why must I suddenly bring this theological junk into it? Well, even though the world around us does not like to give praise or thanks to the source of our blessings – to the source of our very existence – here we do. Here we want to show gratitude and respond and cooperate with the God of Light and Life who loves and blesses and saves us.

Sometimes we turn toward love; sometimes we turn away from it. If we turn away from it for long enough, it often tracks us down in surprising ways. If we turn toward it – try to walk in its ways – it often seems and feels like an alternate language for being obedient and faithful to God. So much so that in a poetic (if careless) moment, the author of First John said: *“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”* (I John 4:16)

The most famous “love passage” in all the Bible is found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”* (I Corinthians 13:1-2) How many of you actually believe that? I know you like the sound of it, but do you actually *believe* it? Then why do we in our culture spend so much time and effort making money and teaching our children how to make money, and so little time learning how to make love and teaching our children how to love and be loved?

If our society really did change its focus and started concentrating on its relationship with God and how to be loving, what would we mean by that? Would we mean “sex”? You can hardly go to a movie or stand in line at a grocery store without getting another dose of the “love means sex” philosophy. But if you go to most churches, you get a pretty heavy dose of the “love means no sex” philosophy. Millions of people assume that if you become truly spiritual, you will turn away from sexuality.

The tension between these two views is widespread, and I think far more troublesome in our society than most people realize. That is, most people think they are the only ones caught in the contradictions. They assume, depending on their presuppositions, that everyone else is having a wonderful time with sex or that everyone else is having a horrid time with it. Maybe both views are true. Whatever we may conclude, one thing is quite obvious: the Creator made sex into a very big item.

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When young couples come to me to be married, they often ask me to suggest a Scripture passage to be read at their wedding. I'm glad they think there should be a connection between the Bible and their love, even if they have not read it enough to find a passage that they like. Frankly, they are often disappointed with the possibilities. The Bible is pretty hard-core, like in First Corinthians 7 or in Ephesians 5. Or it is too spiritual – meaning, too much about God. Shakespeare or one of the other great poets would serve them better, I tell them. But they want the Bible – which, by the way, is an interesting development, for those of you who think the younger generation is less religious than we were. Anyway, not often but sometimes I break down and tell them where the good stuff is.

*Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold,
you are beautiful!
Your eyes are doves behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down
the slopes of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of ewes newly shorn
that have come up from the washing, all of them
have twins, and none have lost a lamb.
Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth
is lovely. Your parted lips behind your veil are
like a pomegranate cut open.
Your neck is like the tower of David, built for
an arsenal, whereon hang a thousand bucklers,
all of them shields of warriors.
Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of
a gazelle, that feed among the lilies.
Until the day breathes and the shadows flee,
I will go to this mountain of myrrh and this
hill of frankincense.
You are beautiful, my love; beautiful without a flaw
You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride, you
have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.
How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride! Your love
is much better than wine, your perfumes sweeter
than any spices!
Your lips distill nectar, my bride; honey and milk
are under your tongue; the scent of your garments
is like the scent of Lebanon.*

(Song of Songs 4) [The word of God for the people of God.]

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So the couple ends up with First Corinthians 13 by default. Is it appropriate? I remember how things were when I was first in love with Mariana. My love was jealous and boastful, even if sometimes I tried to hide it a little. It was not patient, by any of the current definitions. Certainly my love was no stranger to being arrogant, rude, irritable, resentful, or insisting on its own way. So why do we read this passage at wedding ceremonies? Maybe because I am the only black sheep in an otherwise exemplary society. That would be good news, but I doubt it is accurate.

Maybe we read the passage because that is the goal toward which we are moving. I think it's true that, forty-eight years later, my love is not as arrogant, boastful, resentful, or jealous as it was when I first married. But is that spiritual progress, or is it that the fires do not burn as hot at seventy as they did at twenty-one? I don't know – they are still hot enough to scorch *me*. *You* probably never think about such things ...

Whether you do or you don't, I happen to know that the sex/love spectrum has been a huge issue for humanity for as far back as history goes. For many centuries now, including this one, much of the world has concluded that there is no true love *with sex*. Perhaps more people now than ever before have concluded that they are not interested in any love *without sex*. But that is not really modern. Some have mixed love *and sex* as far back as Jacob and Rachel, and, symbolically at least, Adam and Eve.

I have strong opinions – at least prejudices – on the subject, but it really is not all cut-and-dried. Recently we were reading in Galatians: *“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would.”* (Galatians 5:16-17)

The vast majority of Christians conclude, however hastily, that flesh means sex – at least among other things. I say “hastily” because there are numerous other passages where flesh (*sarx*) is used in a positive way. We cannot understand words out of context! Among many other reasons, it is why trying to take the Bible literally is doomed to distortion and misunderstanding.

Millions of people (in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, even some in Judaism and Islam) still believe that the physical is evil and that the spiritual is good. They take passages like the one we just read from

Galatians and claim that it is clear proof that the physical nature is God's worst mistake and that somehow we must overcome our physical nature with the help of God's Son – and especially we must overcome our sexual natures. Behind the Hollywood glitter and the naiveté of youth, enormous numbers of people think that sex is a blight to marriage and that we must either turn away from it altogether or go get it someplace else where long-range relationship is not involved.

This is no new dilemma. Exodus recounts that sexual intercourse was forbidden to all the Israelites during the Sinai theophany. (Exodus 19:15) It says that if we are going to get serious about God and Covenants and the spiritual life, we have to give up sex. Legend has it that after this encounter on the Holy Mountain, Moses never again “knew” his wife, Zipporah (Philo). Was she grateful, or disappointed? Our answer to such a question would tell us more about ourselves than about her.

Priests, holy warriors, and Nazarites all practiced sexual abstinence for discrete periods of time when under vows or in the service of the altar. (Leviticus 15:18; II Samuel 11:11; Deuteronomy 10:1-9) Yahweh's command to Jeremiah was: “*You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters.*” (Jeremiah 16:1-2) This is most often interpreted as a life-long vow of chastity. Many know that there was a special affinity between Jeremiah and the Apostle Paul. Is that why Paul never married?

The Qumran community was a celibate, monasticlike order in the century before Jesus. In this same time period and before, many of the most famous Greek philosophers taught that sex was a hindrance, if not an impossible distraction, to philosophy and spiritual development. Abstention from sex was commended by Plato. The Stoic Epictetus rejected wine, house, city, servants, bed, and wife as distractions from philosophy. A Cynic epistle (not a cynical epistle; an epistle from a Cynic philosopher) to Zeno recognized that wife and children were an encumbrance that aggravated human weakness. Most men here would agree; they are simply willing to pay the price.

Orphics took for granted that sexual chastity was a prerequisite for the divine encounter – for receiving any revelation from the gods. (Pausanias, II.24.1) If you wanted to communicate with God, give up sex. They abstained from eating meat, by the way, in the belief that doing so would kill the sexual appetite. That is more of the original motive for becoming vegetarian than most people realize. Not exclusively, but primarily vegetarianism comes from Hindu culture and religion, where it is

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assumed that in the third or fourth phase of life, when people become mature enough and spiritual enough, they will give up all sex.

All careless remarks to the contrary, neither Jesus nor Paul were married. This has had a huge impact on Christianity. Having no proof of their reasons or motives, we all make them up as we like. From the second century on, much of Christendom assumed it was for the sake of purity and to enhance spiritual development. Showing great restraint, I will not wax eloquent on the contribution to sexless life and love that was bequeathed to most of Christendom by the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. We can probably agree, however, that the vast majority of Christians still today believe that sexuality is tainted with evil and that, aside from bearing children, we should give it up whenever possible.

Shall we assume then, as most Christians in the second, third, and fourth centuries would have assumed, that if our bride and groom today are baptized Christians and if they are being married in the church – meaning, in the presence and context of the believing community – that they, like the rest of us, will abstain from all sexual activity even though they are married? My personal nightmare is that this is truer of them and the rest of us than I realize. Nothing like trying to minister to a repressed and neurotic community, especially if they are really proud of it – and blame God for it. I did not say this *was* true, please remember. I said it was my own personal nightmare.

But I ask: Are you really Protestants, or are you still ashamed of your sexuality? Quite a bit of Protestantism went right back to the same old law and the same old guilt and shame that Luther finally broke out of. Many people don't realize that Luther's marriage to Catherine von Bora was one of the greatest earthquakes of the Reformation. Both a priest and a monk (Augustinian), Luther did not take such a step lightly. Everything in his training and tradition told him that if he married Catherine, he would go straight to Hell – that breaking his vows meant damnation. But Luther finally trusted the grace of Jesus, and he came to believe that the Catholic way was wrong and was leading people away from the grace and love of God in Christ. Luther came to believe that God was for LIFE, and it was Satan who was against it; that God made Life and pleasure and joy on purpose, and it was Satan who always tried to ruin it. He loved Catherine far more than he at first expected or intended, and he came to believe that whenever he made love to her, it was a great insult to Satan – and a thing of gratitude, rejoicing, and delight that he and Catherine and God shared together. Of course, outside of marriage,

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Luther believed that sex was back in Satan's hands and would be used to bring misery, pain, and despair to human life.

Integration of body and soul and spirit is our aim. Glorify God in your body by what you do with it and how you use it. (I Corinthians 6:19-10) The soul is housed in the body. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. All of *these* seeds of a far greater and more beautiful theology are also planted in our tradition. The Creator is awesome. How then can we stay with theories that creation is evil or pointless or wrong? "*God saw that it was good.*" Jesus came to *reverse* the curses, not to run away from them. And remember, He came *in the flesh* – incarnation. No one in the early church, certainly not Paul, ever thought that Life in the next realm would be some kind of disembodied, smoke-and-mirrors existence. "*Not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed.*" (II Corinthians 5:4) We do not go to a bodiless Heaven, but to a much better body. The purpose is not to disinherit or reject our bodies but to learn to integrate body and soul so that both serve our Lord and His Kingdom. And by the way, it is not just the undedicated body that does evil; the unconverted spirit does even more evil. The real dichotomy is not between the physical and the spiritual. The dichotomy is between living for ourselves and being devoted to God. We worship God, and not ourselves, with both soul and body – with all of our mind, and heart, and soul, and strength.

Jesus never married because it would have been incredibly unloving and uncaring to marry and start a family with a woman, knowing that He would be taken from her so quickly. Leaving a wife and children destitute and abandoned did not seem loving to Jesus, like it does to so many men today.

Paul never married because he was convinced that life as we know it was going to end here at any moment. He was wrong, but that was his conviction. There was no time to start a family and raise children here, so wait until the next realm. But Paul had great regard for women, and he believed deeply in marriage. First Corinthians 7:7-9, despite Paul's warning that this is his private opinion, is perhaps the primary New Testament passage used in support of celibacy and against marriage. But this same seventh chapter is powerful support *for* marriage and contains principles for a marriage relationship – including sexual relationship – that far surpass anything you are hearing in the secular world today.

Our sexual natures have huge potential for evil. Why would that surprise us? Do they not also have huge potential for good, if we have truly dedicated and devoted our lives to Jesus Christ? Our spiritual natures have huge potential for good. Do they not also have huge potential for evil if we have not yet dedicated and devoted our lives to Jesus Christ? The Bible is far more concerned about spiritual evil and spiritual death than it is about physical evil or physical death. Thinking we can become spiritual or holy by denying or depriving the body – by pretending we do not have one – has always been an aberration, a simplex cheap shot. Do we still not know the difference between Jesus and John the Baptist? Our Path is far better, and far more difficult, than that: To trust God for all Creation, and for all that it is leading us toward. And to devote all of ourselves to God – body and mind and heart and soul.

What do you suppose happens when the saints and ascetics of this life get to Heaven? Having denied their bodies and their sexuality so completely here, what do they do when they get to the next realm, only to discover that they have been given an even more perfect body – and they have no idea what to do with it? They did not practice and learn with the cheap, cut-down model. Now they have this incredible and magnificent version, and the only thing they know how to do is deny it. I certainly do not mean to imply that they are thrown out of the Kingdom. That is seldom my expectation of God's love or the realms to come. And after all, their intentions were good. But the makeup courses must be strange indeed. Dumbbell Sex 1-A. Well, we doubtless all have some makeup courses to face in one area or another. Dumbbell Commitment and Dumbbell Honesty are probably not all that easy either.

Time to sum up and move on? It is not the flesh, but the “will of the flesh,” that wars against the Spirit. We speak of the body as having a mind and will of its own – a will to survive, to eat, to procreate, to protect itself. And surely we all know the instincts we have that seem to come from within – deeper than the conscious mind. But they are all housed in the mind and directed by the mind, which itself is directed by the soul.

This “will of the flesh” – if unconverted, undedicated, undevoted – serves only our own desire to survive, to eat, to find pleasure, to acquire what we think will make us safe and secure so we can go on surviving, eating, etc. As Paul says, if this is all we are – if we never awaken beyond this level of awareness and purpose – we will die. The body will run down sooner or later. If that is all we are, we will end. To its own level of awareness, the will of the flesh never seems or feels evil. Why is it bad for me to survive? If it takes a whole forest and a vast lake of oil to satisfy

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my needs, so be it. What do I care about others, or the past and the future, or the dimensions beyond? Unless, of course, they figure into my schemes for getting what I want: food, sex, pleasure, security.

Anyone who does not recognize this “will of the flesh” level of awareness within their own life – and in their choices and purposes – is totally controlled by it.

But if the soul awakens to the Holy Spirit, life suddenly breaks open into endless new dimensions. God exists. Other people actually exist and are real. They are no longer just furniture, or pawns to be moved about in our own little game of getting what we need or want. Life gets infinitely more complicated, and infinitely more beautiful. We may start to love the neighbor, care about the past and the future, and find ourselves in awe of dimensions beyond the physical. We may even come to love our Creator and wish to serve him; to wonder at the Creator’s purposes; to devote ourselves to him – to that which is beyond ourselves. Then the body breaks from the “will of the flesh” – and so does the soul – and finds a higher and more powerful will. “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee”

Then what will we do with the body and all its abilities and possibilities? Negate it? Shut it down? Punish it? Deprive it? Reject it? We can do better than that! It will all shut down here soon enough anyway, without any encouragement from us.

Great Lord, with whatever time and life I have left, I will use my body to serve, to love – to do for others and not just myself. And most of all, let me use my body as You intended it to be used – in obedience to Your Holy Spirit – and never again in secret guilt or shame. For You made me. It was not my idea, not my design.

So if you are married or are getting married, undo all the old tapes if you have not already done so. “Great Lord, I can hardly believe You would bring me such an amazing gift – such an incredible person. She is beautiful, inside and out. She is mine, and I am hers. Together we celebrate Life. Help us to glorify You in and with our bodies. Together we seek the Life beyond self. Teach us to enhance and support each other as we each seek our higher destiny, our higher identity, our vocatios, our love of Jesus.”

As Paul says, then you will truly LIVE, and Jesus the Christ will never let you die. He has invested too much time and life and love in you.