

THE NUMBER ONE PROBLEM IN MARRIAGE Dr. Bill Bennett

Some one has observed “the difference in love and marriage is that love intoxicates you and marriage sobers you up.” Yes, marriage sobers one up to the realization that he is no longer singing a solo but a duet. Doris and I waited until we were 28 years old to get married. By this time both of us were so “sot” in our living for number 1 that we found it difficult to surrender our long cherished rights of serving ourselves without thinking of others.

Every couple suffers from the sin of selfishness. Thus, selfishness lies at the heart of every marital problem. Divorce proliferated in the 1970’s because there was an unprecedented shift towards self-centeredness among Americans, giving America the distinction of having the highest divorce rate on earth.

What is the answer to selfishness? Only one thing – authentic love. Love is the most misused word of the 900,000 in the English language. We say we love everything from hot dogs to Holy God. So if love is the answer to selfishness, we must understand what true love is. There are three words in Greek for love.

1. Eros – pertains to the body.
2. Philia – pertains to the soul.
3. Agape – pertains to the spirit.

Dr. Ed Young, a successful pastor for many years, defines these three levels of love in very understandable terms.

Eros love – “is feelings love”

Philia love - “is friendship love.”

Agape love – “is forever love.”

- I. **Feelings love** - I read of a fellow who had a bad case of “feelings love” or “romantic love.” He expressed his emotion in a poem which read:

“I climbed up the door
And shut the stairs;
I said my shoes and took off my prayers.
I shut off the bed and climbed into the light.
And all because –
She kissed me good night!” ¹

Erotic love though crazy at times, is not bad. It was God’s idea. It is also a vital part in marriage.

¹ Ed Young, *The 10 Commandments of Marriage*, Chicago: Moody Press, 2003, p. 36.

- II. **Friendship love** – A certain church bulletin stated “Irving Jones and Jessie Brown were married on Oct. 24th. So ends a friendship that began in school days.”² To put it in other words, someone said that “marriage is the best way to break up a beautiful romance.” However the best marriages I know are those in which the partners not only, “fall in love,” but consider each other as their best friend. I frequently refer to Doris not only as my “first, finest, and final” wife, but also my best friend. I then add, “she’s always been a part of the solution and never a part of the problem.”
- III. **Forever love** - Feeling love and friendship love are mostly based on mutual enjoyment and satisfaction. But, “forever love” is much greater and stronger; it seeks and sacrifices for the other person’s very highest welfare with no expectation of return. We see this love demonstrated by God in sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins even when we were enemies. Many couples try to build a marriage on a one-third love (*Eros*). Others try to build it on a two-thirds love (*Eros* and *Philia*), but a physical and friendship relationship do not ensure a permanent marriage. But couples who enjoy a three-thirds marriage have a marriage of increasing joy and permanence – *Eros*, *Philia* and *Agape*.

God’s Word provides a classic description of *Agape* love in 1 Cor. 13:4-7. A dozen words are used to describe *Agape* love. Each of these words is a verb meaning that love is something you do, not what you just say. Thus, love acts patiently, kindly, does not act jealously, nor boastfully, or inappropriately, does not seek its own interest primarily, does not hold grudges, does not rejoice in wrong but in the truth, bears all burdens, is never cynical, hopes in all situations, and never fails.

“Feelings love” makes marriage exciting. “Friendship love” brings fun into the relationship. “Forever love” is constant and makes the marriage secure.³

In closing I must point out that “forever love” makes a couple one, but it does not destroy one’s personality nor remove ones differences. Many marry only to discover discouragingly that their mate differs from them in many ways. These differences do not mean that the couple is mismatched, but it means that God has brought them together to complete each other, which completion requires them to be different from each other. Doris and I are one in our basic values, but are quite different in our temperament, our likes and dislikes. Doris is slow and deliberate and I am fast and decisive. So I needed Doris to slow me down and Doris needs me to speed her up.

² Ibid. p. 38

³ Ibid

In 2003, Oprah Winfrey asked Billy Graham this question: “What is the secret of your wonderful marriage for 56 years?” Billy simply explained, “We are happily incompatible.” He meant that while he and Ruth were different, they had happily reconciled their differences. This means that Billy and Ruth have overcome the number one problem in marriage – selfishness. How have they been able to overcome the power of selfishness in their lives? By experiencing in their lives a power much greater than self. The power of Agape, God’s kind of love, given to them at the time of the new birth (1 John 4:7-8) and now being constantly poured out in their hearts by the indwelling Holy Spirit - Romans 5:5.

So it can be with any married couple.