

Courtship & Marriage article 13

Dear Young People,

I have reached that point in our discussion of courtship and marriage where we must now talk of marriage itself. The whole subject is discussed in Chapter 7 of my father's book, *Leaving Father and Mother*. I do not intend to discuss this subject in great detail. This is partly because the book discusses the whole subject and I do not want to repeat what the books says, but as far as I know, there are no young people in Singapore at present who are contemplating marriage in the near future. If I would write about it now, you will have forgotten what I wrote by the time you are going to marry. I intend, therefore, to make some general remarks about marriage so that you may know a bit about the end of dating, courtship and engagement.

It is a general rule in our churches that a young couple, when nearing the time of marriage, go to their pastor for several sessions of what is called "marriage counseling." At these sessions a minister will talk with the couple about the idea of marriage, the responsibilities of both the man and the woman in marriage, the practices necessary to enjoy a successful and happy marriage, and the importance of making their marriage a picture of Christ's relationship to the church.

I am going to sit down with you in an imaginary session where I am doing some pre-marital counseling, as they call it. So, even though you have no plans to marry in the foreseeable future, listen to what I have to say.

I myself have held many such sessions; but, sadly enough, I have often had to deal with married people whose marriages are, as they put it so graphically, "on the rocks." They mean by this expression that their marriages can be compared to a ship at sea, that fierce storms have battered the ship of their marriage, and that their marriages have been blown on to rocks where their ship is in danger of being smashed by the wind and waves and being destroyed by the pounding of the storm. It is a fitting enough figure, and it is only with great difficulty that the ship of their marriage can have the damage repaired and their ship rescued from the rocks and put once again on the tranquil seas of matrimony. It is my experience, over many years, that such couples who have marital problems have never been told what marriage is all about, or they have failed to practice what they were taught. I dislike intensely having to deal with married couples who are seeing their marriages gradually decline in fervency, love for each other, and godliness. There is always sin involved somewhere and sin is not easy to deal with when its destructive force has become a reality in the marriage relationship.

It is far, far better to know before entering the marriage state what are the responsibilities of both husband and wife within the bonds of marriage. It is far, far better to start from the moment of speaking the marriage vows the hard work of making marriage acceptable to God and a joy for the family.

I say that a marriage is hard work. Some young couples are so deeply in love that they see no clouds on the horizon, no storms that can possibly destroy their state of bliss in which they find themselves at the time of marriage and during the honeymoon, and no problems which they can possibly face which "love" cannot solve. I suppose it is true that a married couple cannot possibly face problems that love cannot solve; but young people (and frequently, married adults) have a perverted notion of love. They look

at love as some sort of emotional “high” (a “high” that some get from drug use), that is little more than romantic love. They forget that genuine love for each other is rooted in love for God. They perhaps have watched too much TV. They have gained their ideas of love from the world about them. They look at love as romance, excitement, thrills without end, and an almost perpetual honeymoon. If one would ask them what they mean by love, they would give you a description of love that defines love as sloppy, sentimental marshmallow-like attraction for each other, which is some sort of sentimental feeling of selfishness: What am I getting out of this marriage? What’s it in for me? Am I getting my thrills? Am I receiving what I want for this relationship? And the moment this selfishness is not satisfied, the unhappy spouse becomes grumpy and critical, and the marriage is on a sure path to disaster.

But marriage is not that way – ever. A successful marriage does not just happen. It is not automatically the result of marriage vows and a honeymoon. It is not like something that will happen regardless of any other consideration. A happy marriage is always and in every case, the result of hard work, of extra effort, of paying attention to the little things that make up this blessed relationship. It is to ask the question all the time: What can I do to make this marriage a happy one? To please my spouse? To make his/her life a bit more pleasant? To improve our relationship?

The reason for this is that love is indeed the glue of a marriage that holds a marriage together. But only a child of God can really love his or her spouse, for true love is the fruit of God’s love for us. And, in His love for us, He always seeks our good. His love is also a great power in our hearts that makes us love Him. And, because we love Him, we love our spouses.

Because we love our spouses with the love of God, we are thankful for God’s great gift to us of a God-fearing wife or husband. In thankfulness we cherish our gift as most precious, and vow to take care of this gift of a husband or a wife with every power we have.

The law commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Paul echoes this command of the law in Ephesians 5:25-29. After commanding husbands to love their wives, he goes on to compare that love of husband and wife with Christ’s love for His church. He then says: “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church.”

It is an unbelievable hypocrisy when men, ministers of the gospel, are always urging people to love their neighbors, but turn around and divorce their own wives. A wife is a man’s closest neighbor and love for our neighbors begins with love for our wives. If we cannot love our spouses, we cannot love anyone.

Yet, as Ephesians 5 makes clear, the very heart of love, what I would call the only true expression of love, is **giving**. Giving characterizes God’s love for us: “For God so loved the world, that he **gave** his only begotten Son . . . (John 3:16); “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and **sent** his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (I John 4:10).

When we give as an expression of our love, the Bible does not mean that we give our wives (or wives their husbands) nice and expensive gifts. Love is not a new and

costly dress. Love is not a sporty car of her own. Love is not a beautiful house. Love is the giving of one's self. It is the giving of one's time, one's affection, one's energy. It is the complete giving of one's self that the object of one's love may be saved. It is for a man to take care of the baby when he returns from the office exhausted, but finds his wife overwhelmed with the duties of the day – even when he has a briefcase full of work that must be done before the morning. When he desperately needs his sleep, love gets him out of bed in the middle of the night to take care of a sick child. Love is concerned, not about one's self, but about the welfare of the object of love.

There is a total self-forgetfulness about love. I never ask: What is this going to do to me? How am I going to cope with my responsibilities? How can I manage all this and yet do what is my calling? Is this going to upset my schedule? Is it going to involve grave inconveniences for me? Never is that the question. There is a certain recklessness, a certain thoughtlessness of one's self in love. It is to do what love demands though from every earthly point of view it is foolishness.

And it is to love when the object of our love is changed by the ravages of time and age. I read a poem when I was a child that left an indelible mark on me. I do not know the title; I do not know the author. I cannot recite it. But there was one line that stayed with me all these years. It went like this: "Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds and bends the fixed mark to remove. . . ." (Somewhere, very recently, I heard the first line of this poem quoted, but no title or author were mentioned.) The point is that a love which is rooted in the love of God is not dependent on the state of the one we love, and change in the one we love cannot alter love. In fact, the more "unlovely" the object of our love is, the greater is our love. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" (1 John 4:11).

So this is enough to think about until our next "counseling session" in about two weeks.

With love in the Lord,

Prof Hanko