

# After the Honeymoon Is Over

## *Making Love Last a Lifetime:*

Colossians 3:12-14

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In this series *Making Love Last a Lifetime*, we've affirmed some important truths. God made us male and female, different creatures, to compliment one another. In marriage we receive a divine call and mission to meet important needs of another. Notice that it is a divine call to meet important needs of another. I did not say it is mission to have our needs met. Marriage is not using other people to meet our needs. That is a selfish mission. If we needed a mate to be complete, every single person would need to be married; yet many single people are very fulfilled and happy. After I was married, despite the validation of my wife's love, I discovered that I had personal needs that only God could unearth and meet. Marriage is not about me getting my needs met. Marriage is my divine call to serve and complement another human being with divinely authored love.

In this series I depend greatly upon the research and work of Adam Hamilton, a fellow pastor and teacher. Adam met his wife like I did when he was a teenager. Like me, he was so attracted to his mate that he did not want to wait long before he married her. I waited until I reached the ripe, elderly estate of 21. He, on the other hand, got married one week after he graduated from high school. Incidentally, I think Adam is about 10 years younger than me, so I don't think we are talking about him getting married in the dark ages. One day he woke up and realized that he had not a single feeling of attraction or love for his wife.

That very thing happens after the honeymoon is over a lot more than we'd like to admit. Differences between men and women contribute. Most, not all, men are more focused on

accomplishing tasks while most women focus on relationships. Men want to conquer a 500-mile-trip as fast as possible, while women want to relate during the trip. Men want to win the affection of their mate and get married, conquer; but afterwards, they often turn their attention to another thing to conquer, and the wife feels abandoned and loses feelings she once had. Personal deficits erode a relationship. Addictions, unresolved anger, insecurities, all hurt relationships. Unmet expectations, hidden from us until one is not met, leave aches in our hearts. According to psychologist John Gottman, two-thirds of all couples experience a significant change in feelings for one another in the aftermath of having children. That was the case for Adam and LaVon Hamilton. Adam writes:

*LaVon and I fell out of love. We still were committed to each other. We had married each other for better or for worse – and this was not so bad. I did not dislike her; but I felt no romantic feelings for her, no deep love for or closeness to her. We shared a home, a bed, and a child, bound together by a promise made nearly five years earlier.*

At that point, as at several other junctures, their marriage could have progressed along any of three paths. They could have taken a very common approach in marriage and continue to drift apart, never recovering their first love, but cohabiting together for the sake of their commitments to God and their child. They could have sought to part as amicably as possible and seek some terms to sharing the upbringing of their daughter. Third, they could learn to rekindle the flame of their first love and develop an even deeper love and stronger relationship. Without them fully understanding it, God led them down that third path.

Before I continue with their story, I must say that their story helped me put together a few things that had been dangling out there. Part of my ministerial training included marriage and family counseling. Counselors are visited by three types of couples. The first type is planning to wed and are required by us pastors to get counseling. These premarital couples tend to focus on

their strengths and minimize their problems or issues. They are energized by their strengths and want to be together. The second type is married couples. They come to improve what they have. They tend to focus on problems and minimize their strengths. The third type is troubled couples. These folk are on the brink of separating or divorcing. They focus on their problems and dismiss their strengths. They believe that their strengths have been irretrievably lost or were merely illusions.

The problem with much counseling is that we think the relationship will improve if we fix the problems. We focus on what the couples focus. We work on conflict resolution and forget what brought the couple together. **Truthfully, couples won't split up because of problems; and conflict resolution won't restore their feelings of love.**

John Gottman, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Washington, is a renowned expert on healthy marriages. He basically tells couples to do again what brought them together in the first place. Here are four of his principles. *(1) Know your mate.* A key to any friendship is learning about the person. Gottman says that is even more important in marriage. Couples must be intentional about getting to know each other's likes, dislikes, interests, thoughts and friends. Think about it. How can you answer your divine call to meet your mate's needs if you're ignorant about them? *(2) Nurture your fondness and admiration for your mate.* That is what happens during courtship. This person comes into your life and you experience positive things, but all too soon we take that for granted. Think of how ungrateful we are to God when we are given life, health, family, food, shelter, country, democracy, employment, comforts, friendships, and so much else. The hymn, "count your many blessings, name them one by one," is a terrific exercise in marriage too. We miss so many things that our mates do, things that are gifts to us! As we name it, we grow in thankfulness and admiration. *(3) Turn toward your mate*

*and not away.* Gottman noticed that couples who pay attention to each other – respond to one another, who talk to each other, even if it is just a few words here and there, and also do simple things together, not the super-romantic dates necessarily but smaller everyday things, like grocery shop, horse around, call from work to see how the other is doing – enjoy marital success.

(4) *Let your mate influence you.* This principle is directed especially toward men. Gottman notes that when a man resists his wife’s influence, statistically, there is an eighty-one percent chance that his marriage will self-destruct. One major newspaper picked up on this finding and wrote:

*Husbands forget all the psycho-babble about active listening and validation. If you want your marriage to last for a long time, the newest advice from psychologists is quite simple: Just do what your wife says.*

Of course, that is an over-simplification of Gottman’s point. This is not a call for husbands to capitulate to every whim of their wives; but why would God bring a man and woman together if they were not to influence one another more than any other relationship? Gary Smalley is a respected Christian marriage counselor. He tells the story of a large NFL football player who gave a pair of his pants to his bride on their wedding night and asked if they fit her. When she said “no,” he said, “I just want you to know who wears the pants in this family. His bride had a great comeback; and the football player discovered that his clothes would be the only ones he would be familiar with if he didn’t change his attitude. Relationships are not about who wears the pants; they are about shared perspectives and shared life.

It was some time after midnight when Adam Hamilton received an impression that he came to recognize as the voice of the Holy Spirit, “Go out and buy your wife some flowers.” Devoid of any feelings for his wife, yet having this persistent impression, he went to an all-night store and bought a dozen roses. The impression continued, “Bless her.” Adam wrote a card of

appreciation. He placed the roses in place where she could find them when she got up the next morning. Finally, he heard from the Spirit, "Pray for her." He did. It wasn't long before his wife reciprocated, and as he continued to pray for her and reciprocate, both his and her feelings began to grow. Within weeks, his attitude and feelings changed.

Isn't it interesting that this reflects the calling we read in Scriptures for Christian believers? There isn't as much emphasis on resolving our conflicts as there is on choosing the attitudes and actions of love. We are to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility and patience toward others. When it comes to our faults, we are to bear with each other. We are to put up with it rather than focus on it. We are to forgive one another just as Christ forgave us. Christ didn't wait until we repented. He died for us while we were still sinning. He put on love, even if he wasn't feeling it.

The Bible often calls us to act contrary to our feelings, contrary to fear, anger or doubt. I know that the role of emotion is powerful. The "e" in "emotion" can stand for energizing motion. However, in life the "e" in "emotion" is often the effect of our motion, the effect of choices. We do something and later get the feeling. That is the life of faith.

The Bible does not call us to overlook every problem or deficit. Some things are so destructive that tolerance of them will soon result in unspeakable pain. We have a biblical call to confession, a biblical call to repent, a biblical call to speak the truth; but it is in the context and dominant atmosphere of love. Gottman has a magic ratio that seems to mirror what the Bible teaches. He says that couples will grow in love if they offer five affirmations for every complaint they lodge. You won't meet a person without shortcomings; we all have them. You won't live in a relationship where you don't suffer in some way. However, acts of love will create blessing in those relationships and fulfill your destiny. Learn to love.