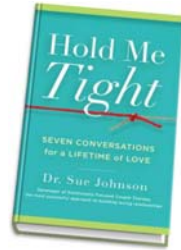


DO YOU WANT TO IMPROVE YOUR MARRIAGE?

JESUS REPLIED "LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND. THIS IS THE FIRST AND GREATEST COMMANDMENT. AND THE SECOND IS LIKE IT: LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF".



In her book, *Hold Me Tight*, Dr. Sue Johnson makes the observation “love has become, for better or worse, in the 21st Century the central emotional drive in most people’s lives”. Numerous surveys show by far the majority of people value a satisfying love relationship, ahead of financial success, a satisfying career or anything else. But is this theologically okay? When we look at the bible, does it justify such a desire or should we be suppressing that desire and focusing on more Godly pursuits?



On this the bible is clear; love should play a dominant role in our lives, it has been placed in us by God, therefore we should pursue it with the vigour that God intends. The pursuit for more love in our relationships and especially in the home is a worthy and thoroughly Godly pursuit. After all the Apostle John tells us in 1 John 4:8 that God Himself is love, in other words, so much is love the dominating characteristic of God that the Bible declares that God is love. Everything that God says or does is in some way an expression of his love (1 John 4:8,16).

When God created the world and everything in it the pinnacle of His Creation was human kind, for in humans He could love them and be loved back by them. Let’s face it African animals are far more interesting, they bring God glory, they bring Him joy, but they don’t have the capacity to love God as human beings do.

The bible says He loves human beings above angels. Angels are more powerful than human beings but He loves us more. Hebrews 2:16 says *where does he take hold of angels : but of the seed of Abraham he takes hold*, why? Because we have a higher capacity to love than Angels. Jesus even said the two greatest commands were to love – Love Him and love others. The apostle Paul said love is the greatest gift and most important function of the church, and every New Testament writer implores us to make love the dominating pursuit in our lives.

God is so committed to love that when human kind sinned and walked away from Him and that day-to-day loving relationship was lost, God’s

desire for love, drove Him to restore that relationship of love, firstly with Israel as a nation and then with all the nations of the world.

Deuteronomy 7:7 The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers

Jeremiah 31:3 "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.

But of course God intended to share His love further afield. He wanted to offer His love to the whole world. John records the words of Jesus; "For God so loved the world he gave his only son" (John 3:16). Why? To get that love back.

Are you committed to love to the extent God is? Do you cultivate it in your relationship with Him, do you cultivate it in your household? Is your marriage full of love, is your house full of love? Do you even know what Love is?

Defining love is not all that easy, yet if we are to cultivate love in our homes and in our relationships we need to have a better understanding of what it is? Charles Darwin and those who are committed to an evolutionist understanding of life, would say love is that drive within us, that urge to mate and to keep the species going and in particular, to keep our individual genes going. But plenty of people have babies without love; even more have sex without love. No! Love is something different again.

Others say love is that feeling of euphoria, those butterfly feelings when you first fall in love. But again no! That's not love. Those butterfly feelings go in time, but true love remains. It's wonderful when you talk to people who have been married for 50 years and they talk about love. It's a mature love, it's not out of control emotions that are experienced when you first fall in love.

I've heard it said even in Christian circles that love is a mutually beneficial alliance based on trading favours. Have you heard that? In its crudest form the husband says to his wife; "you give me sex, I'll give you

security or emotional connection". Plenty of relationships are built on that kind of agreement, but that is not love. Love is different, the love that God has and wants us to have is much deeper and more meaningful.

To find the clearest definition of what Love actually is, we need to look again at God. In Genesis 12 we see that God chose Israel. God said to Abraham "I choose you and I'll make of you a nation". Clearly He wanted Israel to love Him exclusively. For God, an important component of love was for Israel to love Him wholly and solely, this is seen most clearly in the first few commands of the Ten Commandments; Deuteronomy 5:6f *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ⁷ "You shall have no other gods before me. ⁸ "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁹ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God."*

So as we study the interaction between God and Israel, we see that love is an exclusive attachment, an attachment of adoration, and affection. Look at Psalm 147:10-11, The Psalmist in this passage is expressing what love is for God.

His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

And the psalmist in Psalm 84:1-2 expresses love from man's point of view, expressed in a way that is appropriate and pleasing to God.

How lovely is your dwelling place O Lord of hosts! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God... For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Love is then all about an exclusive emotional attachment, not in an out of control way, like when you first fall in love and you can't think straight. No! It's a daily deliberate choice to attach ourselves exclusively to Him - to daily express our commitment, our admiration, our affection to Him and as we do this, look at how God responds. Ephesians 1:9 tells

us that ... according to His pleasure He makes known to us the mystery of Himself. Are you getting a picture of what Love is? Love is emotional attachment mutually expressed by adoration, admiration and interaction. God loves you! He chose you! He redeemed you and He wants to express to you, not just once or twice, but everyday the deep mysteries of His being.

It is this “making known to us the mystery of Himself” which is another component of true love. Dr. Sue Johnson points out that this sharing of the mysteries, the deep things, the things that we hold secret to all but a select few, this is an essential component of true love. The word *emotion* comes from the Latin word *emovere*, to move. We are moved when those we love show their deeper feelings to us.

More often than not, we hide these deeper things, from ourselves as much as from others. We engage in destructive dialogues which mask our hurt and secret emotions, we fill our lives up with work or play or we numb the pain with drugs and alcohol, yet it is part of God’s make up and since we were created in His image, part of our make up to reveal “the mysteries”. We were made to love and true love is to emotionally connect in such a way that we reveal the mysteries of our innermost thoughts and emotions.

God made us to attach, He placed it in us. That drive is what makes us reach out to Him, look for a spouse, look for close friends. It’s wired in our genes. It is as basic to life, health, and happiness as the drives for food, shelter, or sex. We need emotional attachments and living a life that is pleasing to God is to make the effort to emotionally attach.

It wasn’t that long ago when this view of love was radically out of line with our culture’s social and psychological ideas of adulthood: that maturity means being independent and self-sufficient. The notion of the invulnerable warrior who faced life and danger alone was admired. Consider Mad Max, consider the Samurai, consider the many Clint Eastwood and James Bond characters - the iconic impervious man. These cold and emotionless figures were admired.

In years gone by psychologists have used words like undifferentiated, co-dependent, symbiotic, or even fused to describe people who seem unable to be self-sufficient, but now they are realising self-sufficiency, emotional steeliness, or coldness, the inability to emotionally connect is actually a sign of immaturity and dysfunction.

God made us to love, to connect with Him emotionally and to connect with select and special others -our spouse, our children, significant and select friends.

When was the last time you reached out and took your partner's hand and said "I love you above everyone else, I love being with you more than anyone else, I feel secure enough to share my deepest darkest secrets". If you can't remember the last time then shame, shame, shame. Don't take it for granted that he or she knows. You need to tell them often.

When was the last time you sat your child down and said "I love you not because you are cute, not because you get good grades at school, not because you help around the house or clean your bedroom up, I love you because you are you. I love being near you, I love hanging out with you and there is nothing you could tell me that would make me stop loving you. Even when you do bad things I will never stop loving you, I may yell at you or even punish you, but I want you to know I love you with an everlasting love".

Does this sort of love sound familiar? Yes, of course it does. It's God's love. He offers that sort of love to you and me, and He wants you to offer that sort of love to your household.

God has hard wired into each of us the capacity to love and be loved. It is a basic primary need, like oxygen or water. Yet so often we do not cultivate it, we do not express it, we do not practice it as we should. Our marriage improvement series begins here.

The truth is every couple stands at the altar with a desire to connect deeply and emotionally. Every parent holds a new born child in their

arms with the hope that their relationship will be one of deep affection. Everyone desires a best friend whom they can trust and share with, but as the years roll by and as life's problems are encountered, we find ourselves entering into dialogues that disconnect. Those dialogues may on the surface be all about a problem or issue, but underneath they are communicating things that deeply threaten our attachment. Sometimes we even enter into dialogues which mask what we are really feeling. Whether these dialogues are about finances, children, the latest movie or whatever, the issue is not important, it is the perceived underlying message that causes or disguises deep anxiety, anger or hurt.

As we look at the bible we get a glimpse at some of those destructive dialogues. Usually they are an abridged version of the dialogue but nevertheless a keen eye will see the damage being done. Consider Genesis 12:10 the discussion that took place between Abraham and Sarah his wife.

Genesis 12: 10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. ¹¹ As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹² When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

On the surface was a very real issue of danger and how Abraham was going to overcome that. After all his wife and whole entourage of slaves and employees were relying on Abraham to protect them. Abraham also felt the very real responsibility to co-operate with God in fulfilling the promise of becoming a nation.

What Abraham proposed was not something he wanted to do but felt was his only option to protect himself and the fledgling nation. However what do you suppose was communicated to Sarah? Each of us needs to feel that we are chosen and valued above everything. This is love, God has shown this kind of love to us and we are called to show this kind of love to others especially our significant others.

God has placed in each of us this need to be loved and that means exclusive attachment, an attachment of adoration, and affection. We need to show and be showing our significant other, be they our marriage partner, child or best friend, that they are loved above everything else and that we are loyal in that love and in all situations committed to our significant other no matter what. As we deal with life's difficulties, as we discuss and solve problems we need to be constantly vigilant that we are not communicating things that cause attachment anxiety or attachment doubts. As Abraham put that proposal to Sarah do you think it may have caused some attachment anxiety? I think it may have.

Life is full of all sorts of problems, for example we have financial problems, "with the threat of retrenchments in the air do we buy a new car this year?" Time distribution problems "I'd like to go on a hiking trip but it is the day of your birthday" Problems are something we can never get away from, however when we tackle those problems we need to be very careful that we do not communicate in a way that threatens the trust and the bond we have. You see the truth is, there is no fear bigger than the fear that our partner doesn't love us anymore. That's why divorce is always so messy and painful, because love matters more than anything else and when that is under threat through everyday dialogues, feelings of anger and fear are created within us.

Consider this scenario.

As her husband leaves the dinner table and begins stuffing his briefcase full of business papers, the wife snaps in an accusative tone, "You're not going back to work again are you? The husband snaps back "Do you think I want to? I'm being hounded at work. Is a little understanding too much to ask for?" She responds by saying: "You are a workaholic and you love your work more than me." Furious he says "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response." He slams the door feeling angry, criticised, and under-appreciated. She's left in a cold quiet house feeling under-valued, and abandoned.

Now here's the irony; both desire with all their heart; appreciation, acknowledgement and closeness. What's more, there are things within both their comments which testify to this yearning. Yet what each other

heard was “you don’t love me”. The problem – having to go back to work - has led to a destructive dialogue and they have both heard things neither intended to communicate. Will this couple be able to acknowledge the underlying feelings and fears and reconnect or will this kind of dialogue be followed by another and another and another?

Psychologists and counselors now know that emotional responsiveness is what makes or breaks love relationships. Happy stable couples can quarrel and fight, but they also know how to 1) dialogue using words that don’t threaten their emotional connections and most importantly 2) if disconnection does occur they know *how* to restore emotional connection after a clash.

You will notice from the scenario that often a conversation will escalate into something that is destructive and far bigger than the actual problem. Most couples develop a dialogue pattern which is quite destructive and no matter what the problem is, the dialogue pattern is the same. Recognising these patterns is important for it enables us to dialogue and deal with our problems in a healthier manner.

Sue Johnson calls the first dialogue pattern

Find the Bad Guy. This is a pattern of mutual blame. In our scenario the wife accuses the husband of being a workaholic, the husband accuses the wife of being unsympathetic to his problem. Both partners define the other as uncaring or defective. Everybody loses. But this attack/ counter-attack pattern is hard to keep up. It is usually the opening measure to the most common and ensnaring dance of all - the Protest Polka.

The Protest Polka. The pattern of mutual blame and accusation usually gives way to one partner stepping back. This actually causes even more anxiety. The pursuer pursues even harder whilst the other retreats feeling an inadequate failure.

What’s going on inside of us? After hundreds of studies we now understand that the wired-in need for emotional connection and the fear of rejection and abandonment is so strong it makes us go on the

attack. Even if our brains know that we are somehow making things worse by criticising or shutting our partner out, we cannot just switch off this longing and fear. "The more he refuses to talk to me or dismisses my feelings, the angrier I get and the more I poke him" says the wife. "Anything to get a response from him." Her husband picks up, "And the more I hear that angry tone in her voice, the more I just hear that I can never please her. However, the demanding protesting partner won't maintain this forever, failure to connect will soon lead into the last dance of all.

Freeze and Flee. In this dance both partners feel helpless. No-one is reaching for anyone here. No-one is taking any risks. Everyone has run for cover. In other relationships this might be fine for a while, but with the people we love, this "no response" dance is excruciating. Indeed, the partners here aren't really dancing at all. They have withdrawn. We are not wired to tolerate this kind of isolation. If nothing changes, the relationship is finished.

In some cases the wife or the husband might say things are better than they have ever been as we don't fight anymore. But what has happened is that for one of them the relationship is over.

Do you recognise any of these destructive dialogues in your home? Remember it can be not only in your marriage, it can be with your kids, it can be with your best friend. What can you do? Is there anything you can do? Well, yes there is and with Christ by your side you can defeat these destructive dialogues and restore that failing relationship. As Christians we are more equipped than anyone else to overcome these destructive dialogues because we are more committed to love than anyone else. We have experienced firsthand the unconditional love of God. We know what love is and we know Jesus is the one who left His place in the heavenlies to pursue us and to bring us back into a right relationship. Jesus stands with us as we find the courage and the right words to save our relationships.

If you are in a relationship that is failing, if you recognise these dialogues in your home there are three things you have to find hope, courage and

humility. There is tremendous fear, generated in a relationship that is failing. And someone is going to have to find the courage and the humility to talk about that pink elephant in the room. We are bombarded with fearful thoughts like “what happens if in my reaching out I am rejected, or I fail, or I am dismissed and laughed at? Perhaps it’s just easier if I stay silent”. Yes, it is easier if you stay silent, but God didn’t with you. He loved you so much He sent His only Son. Now you go reach out to your partner. You save your failing relationship.

Three steps to reconnection.

Step 1. Openly acknowledge your painful feelings of hurt and worthlessness before the Lord: Hebrews 4:15 teaches us that *our Great High Priest can sympathise with us when we experience weakness*. How wrong it is, then, to hide our emotional weaknesses from Him and to deny ourselves the comfort of Jesus.

As you experience His love and comfort your anger and fear will subside, as John puts it in 1 John 4:18 Jesus has for you a perfect love that drives out fear. Pray for courage, pray for humility, pray for words of grace and love, pray for wisdom and as James says in James chapter 1 *“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, it will be given.”*

Step 2. Go to your significant other. Go in humility and go with forgiveness in your heart, not anger but in love, the humble, honest love that comes from Christ.

Step 3. Don’t talk about the issues, “you work too much” or, “you don’t appreciate me”. Talking about the issues will put you straight back into the destructive dialogue pattern. Talk about the stuff that really matters to you, the stuff that matters to every human being, the stuff that is really being threatened. Talk about your need to be close, to be valued, and to be cherished. Pick your words carefully.

Step 4. If you can, acknowledge the love your significant other has for you and the pain and frustrations felt by your significant other. Talk about the destructive dialogues and how they make you feel. Don’t talk about the issue, talk about what is indirectly being communicated to you. E.g. “When we fight it makes me feel like I don’t matter.” If you can, acknowledge your fault in indirectly communicating things that cause attachment anxiety and apologise for that.

Humility and courage mixed with Wisdom and God's empowering presence are things needed to save a marriage, to save any relationship. And if you know Christ they are available to you. Let's resolve today to get the most out of our relationships for the glory of God!!

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