

COVENANT KEEPERS

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What it means to love your spouse.

Have you ever thought about what you mean when you say the words, *I love you* to your spouse? In counseling people regularly declare their love for their mate. However, if the person making this profession of love is struggling in their marriage I usually ask them to define the word *love* for me. I ask for this definition because I have found that many couples struggle with loving each other in two ways. The first is that they usually don't understand the practical actions that are involved in loving another. The second problem is much worse. Once a person knows how to love their mate, they simply choose not to act on this knowledge. This failure to walk in love is the most common cause of problems in a marriage. Therefore, test your knowledge of what it means to love and determine if you are behaving in a manner that is helping or hindering your relationship.

Why is this examination of your behavior so important? It's very simple. The way in which you love your mate will directly affect the way he or she will love you. Jesus said, *"Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them"* (Matt. 7:12). Therefore, if you want your spouse to sincerely love you, you first must be actively loving your mate. You may already be thinking, *But he or she is not loving me.* That may be true, but your only responsibility before God is to deal with your own behavior. You can't change your spouse, but you can influence them by how you behave. Ask yourself if you love in this manner.

The attributes of love:

1. Giving love. One of the most important characteristics of true love is that it gives. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that *"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have*

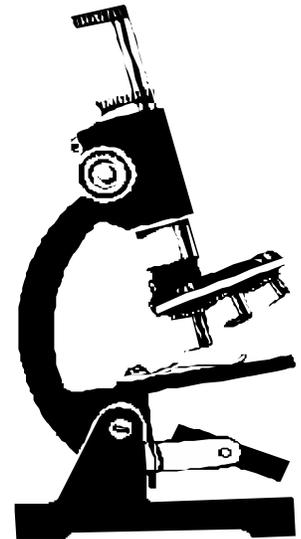
everlasting life" (John 3:16). God loved us so much that He gave us His most precious gift, His Son. God continues to love us by pouring His blessings upon us day after day. Giving is the foundation of true love. Consider, are you the giver in your relationship or are you the one expecting to receive?

One of the greatest complaints that I hear in marriage counseling is one partner telling me that he or she is doing the majority of the giving and their mate is simply sitting back and enjoying all the benefits. If this is the case in your marriage, do you realize that you are draining the life and love right out of your relationship? When a spouse declares, "I feel drained and empty. I don't have any more to give," then I know that there is not an equality of giving love within that marriage. One person is doing the majority of the giving and the other is just taking. One-sided giving cannot continue indefinitely! Why? Because one day the spouse doing most of the giving will realize that giving is a two way street and he or she doesn't see a lot of traffic coming the other way. Resentment begins to build and the giving spouse stops putting out. At this point, the relationship begins to deteriorate.

If you are the taker in your marriage, you've got to make a major turn around in your behavior. If you truly love your mate you'll remember what Jesus said: *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts 20:35). Only by learning to give will you experience the blessedness Jesus described in this passage.

2. Sacrificial love. Love by definition must be sacrificial to be true love. In the Old Testament when God asked for an unblemished animal to be offered to Him on the altar, it was to be the best sheep or goat (Num. 18:29-30). The people were not allowed to give an animal that was sick or diseased (Lev. 22:20-24; Mal. 1:8). To give their best animal would have been a true financial sacrifice for them. This is exactly how God gave His love to you. Do you realize that you were redeemed by the unblemished and

holy Son of God? Peter declared, *"You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot"* (1 Peter 1:18-19). If God sacrificially gave His best because He loved you, how can you give back to Him anything less? How can you love others with anything less than with this kind of sacrificial love (1 John 3:16)?



But, what hinders sacrificial love in a relationship? It's selfishness. Living selfishly will always motivate a person to withhold love and seek his or her own benefit and ease. As you seek your own interests first it will inevitably lead to strife in your relationship (James 3:16).

In addition, living selfishly will bar you from ever knowing the joy of sacrificial love. Remember, the Scripture declared of Christ's sacrifice, *"Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross"* (Heb. 12:2). Have you ever experienced the joy and satisfaction of sacrificial giving that has no ulterior motive? If you have, live this same way at home with your mate.

3. Serving love. True sacrificial giving will also inspire loving service to your

"She is your companion and your wife by covenant" Mal. 2:14

spouse. Paul encouraged all believers that we should by *“love serve one another”* (Gal. 5:13). Therefore, if you love your spouse, how are you serving him or her in practical ways?

All service begins with putting another first, which is the definition of a servant (Luke 17:7-8). If both husband and wife are seeking to serve the other, there will be no room for the “me first” attitude that develops in so many marriages. Jesus pointed out to His own disciples that they could never effectively serve Him if they considered their own needs first (Luke 9:59; 61). Therefore, who has the first position in your marriage, you or your mate? Putting your mate first is what Paul meant when he said, *“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another”* (Rom. 12:10). The word *preference* means to take the lead in loving others. In other words, you should take the first step to love and serve. Is this your daily behavior?

In addition, serving must always be very practical. John declared that we should not *“love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth”* (1 John 3:18). Therefore, how are you serving your spouse in deed and truth? Do you help when your service is required in the yard or around the house? Are you willing to help with the laundry or the children’s baths? If asked will you do an errand for your mate just for the sake of love? If not, your profession of love is very shallow. Don’t be lazy and think that service is for everyone else but you.

4. Love freely given. One of the most misunderstood aspects of marital love is the fact that true love is totally voluntary, unforced, and free of manipulation or control. God declared that this was the way He loved His people when He promised, *“I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely”* (Hos. 14:4). The word *freely* in this verse means voluntarily. In other words, God is explaining that His love can’t be forced or manipulated by others and that He has chosen to love His people for His own reasons. Jesus said the same thing about the love that motivated Him to go to the cross. *“Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself”* (John 10:17-18). Jesus was declaring that no one was controlling His decisions. He was voluntarily giving up His life because He loved us.

Why is this aspect of your love so important to maintaining your relationship? Because many husbands and wives tell me that they have fallen out of love with their mate and at the same time declare that they have a controlling, manipulating, pressuring, nagging, jealous, or clingy spouse. All of these behaviors destroy the voluntary nature of love. Couples also relate to me that when they first dated and became engaged they did so out of a voluntary choice, but now all they sense is force or control strangling the desire to love.

If you are the spouse that is attempting to control, let me say to you that this manipulation is destroying the very love that you are attempting to keep or renew. Love must always be given out of a free choice by the one loving. The more you seek to force, manipulate, and control your mate, the less you will be loved.

If you have fallen into this trap, ask your mate’s forgiveness and return to loving freely without nagging and control. Seek your mate’s best interest and encourage activities that promote freedom and trust. If you can’t seem to give up these behaviors, you should seek personal counseling for yourself.

5. Submissive love. It is important to note that before Paul commanded a wife to submit to her husband or a husband to love his wife, he commands both to submit to each other. All should be *“submitting to one another in the fear of God”* (Eph. 5:21). Why? Because mutual submission is a necessity for all relationships including marriage. Likewise, Peter commanded, *“All of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’ ”* (1 Peter 5:5). Note that Peter also associates humility with all believers being submissive to each other. In reality, it is only a prideful and independent attitude that refuses to seek a solution and common ground with others.

Consider, are you the giver in your relationship or are you the one expecting to receive?

How can you tell if you are unsubmitive? Does your mate tell you that you are not receptive to hear his or her opi-

nions or ideas? Do you make independent financial or parenting decisions that create conflict in your marriage? Have you been told that you are verbally harsh when conversing? Are you unwilling to compromise over minor issues of disagreement? If so, these are unloving and unsubmitive behaviors that will only hinder you and your spouse growing together in love. Take the opportunity today and acknowledge your fault before God and your spouse. Ask Him for that submissive heart towards your spouse.

6. Supporting love. Why is it that many marriages seem to degenerate into a competition between two people who should be supporting each other? It is simply because one or both partners do not sense that the other truly loves them. They don’t perceive that their spouse has their best interests at heart. This is not the Scripture’s definition of a loving relationship. The apostle Paul instructs: *“I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ”* (Acts 20:35). The important words in this passage are laboring, give, and support. The word *support* means to get involved in a task by picking up the other end of an object being carried. What a clear illustration of supporting love. In other words, to love someone you must support them by bearing their burden, not competing with them. Is this the way you see your marriage relationship? Are you supporting one another or fighting over who is directing the show?

David declared that this is how God treated him when he was on the run from Saul. *“He delivered me from my strong enemy, from those who hated me, for they were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my calamity, but the LORD was my support”* (Ps. 18:17-18).

If you are in competition with your mate for control over who will have the last word in a discussion or who dominates decision-making, you will forfeit any sense of support and companionship. You must remember that you are both the support beams in one family. You hold the entire household together by working with and supporting each other. You are one flesh, (Gen. 2:24)! Don’t miss out on the strength and wisdom of your most important support person in life.

7. Kind love. Quite often when couples come into my office for marriage counseling they will sit in front of me and begin to speak to each other in the most rude, harsh, and critical manner. I will immediately stop them and ask if they truly want to reconcile and renew their love for each other. They almost always declare, "Oh yes, we desperately want to reconcile." I then explain that their unkindness to each other is completely contradictory to this stated desire.

Do you understand that unkind words or behavior is in effect the same as if you shouted, "I don't love you!" in their face? Paul declared that love is "*patient and kind*" (1 Cor. 13:4). Your display of kindness towards others proves that your heart is caring, tender, and forgiving (Eph. 4:32). God also directly associates His mercy with kindness. David said, "*His merciful kindness is great toward us*" (Ps. 117:2). Is your tender merciful kindness *great* toward your spouse? It should be!

Solomon commanded husbands: "*What is desired in a man is kindness*" (Prov. 19:22). To wives: "*She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness*" (Prov. 31:26).

Is the law of kindness controlling your tongue? Do your deeds communicate your patient affection for your loved one? You must be "*kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love*" (Rom. 12:10). Kindness expresses affection in a very real and practical way that will draw you not only into brotherly love but marital love as well.

8. Understanding love. Another complaint I regularly hear from couples is the lack of understanding in their marriage. A husband gets exasperated at his wife when she is upset because he doesn't help around the house after he comes home from work. He does not understand that she has also been working all day and needs his help. Another example is a wife who has little compassion for her husband when he loses his job, not understanding that he senses an enormous pressure to be the provider for his family. Do you sense this lack of understanding from your spouse? Is there anything you can do to change this deficiency?

The first thing that is important to note is that the Scriptures teach that spouses can change. Peter told husbands to dwell with their wives with "*understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weak-*

er vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7). Scripture also teaches that Abigail was "*a woman of good understanding*" (1 Sam. 25:3). In both passages God reveals how essential understanding is for a good relationship and how capable both partners are to possess it.

Second, you must realize that understanding is simply thoughtfulness, concern, and a supportiveness that comes from love. It is the fruit of perceiving your mate's needs and hurts and being willing to show compassion and encouragement. The word *understanding* literally means to know by investigation. Therefore, if you truly want to love and understand your spouse, you must investigate what he or she thinks, feels, hopes, and fears. Then you must act on this knowledge in a compassionate way that brings assurance to your spouse of your care and support.

God's understanding and knowledge of the children of Israel's plight in Egypt motivated Him to act on their behalf and brought assurance and comfort to the Jewish nation. Remember what God said to Moses? "*I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to ... a land flowing with milk and honey... Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them*" (Ex. 3:7-9). God revealed by His words that He truly understood the suffering of His people and He was ready to help.

Love must always be given out of a free choice by the one loving.

If you truly understand your mate's needs and struggles, you too will demonstrate this understanding by helpful actions that deliver them from their hardship or suffering. Determine today specific ways that you can show your mate that you are a man or woman with an understanding heart.

9. Laboring love. To demonstrate true love you need to take practical actions that constantly reveal your love. However, marriage partners are usually waiting for the other spouse to do what is required first. Many fail to aggressively take action that will prove their love because they are reserved or shy. Others simply don't care enough to serve. John encouraged all believers to not wait to be loved, but to take the initiative. This is the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12). If you don't want your words to be regarded as insincere, then show your love by what you do. Truth is always revealed by your deeds.

When Paul praised the church at Thessalonica he remembered their "*work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Thess. 1:3). The apostle knew that true faith would always work, that sincere love would always labor, and that confident hope would always be patient. These are the sure characteristics of a person who loves God and others.

Do you truly love your spouse? If you do, how are you laboring to make his or her life easier? I'm not talking about the words you profess. What are you doing to enhance and develop your companionship with your mate? Are you instigating conversation to show you truly care about your relationship? Do you suggest a weekly date or do you wait for your mate to bring up the subject? Do you initiate recreational activities, revealing that you enjoy your mate's company? These are just some of the ways you must labor to show your love towards your spouse.

10. Gentle love. When you consider the topic of love do you connect love with gentleness? Many do not understand this attribute of love. However, Paul associated these two qualities together many times. He asked the Corinthians if they wanted him to come to them with "*a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness*" (1 Cor. 4:21). Paul also encouraged the Ephesian church to walk in "*all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love*" (Eph. 4:2). In other words, love is seen in a humble, gentle, and longsuffering attitude. Peter also encouraged wives to display the "*beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God*" (1 Peter 3:4). Is gentleness precious in your sight?

Does gentleness characterize the way you speak and behave toward your spouse? Or, are you sarcastic, critical, or abusive? The lack of gentleness is one of the most overlooked causes of marital disharmony. Ask God today for His gentle love to fill your heart!

11. Forgiving love. Another fundamental cause of a deteriorating love in marriage is an unwillingness to forgive. When you have unresolved issues in your marriage there will naturally be unforgiveness in your heart. When you allow one or more of these counterfeit types of love to exist in your relationship, conflicts will result. If you don't forgive and instead hold onto resentment, your heart will only grow hard and the distance in your relationship will only increase. Sincere love can't exist in this kind of relationship. Why? Because true love always seeks reconciliation and forgiveness (John 3:16). God loved you so much that He sought to reconcile and forgive you by sending His Son to die in your place. The apostle John added: "*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*" (1 John 4:11).

Are you loving your spouse the same way you have been loved by God? Choose to forgive and seek reconciliation with your spouse just as the Father has with you. Remember Christ's command: "*Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses*" (Mark 11:25). Don't wait! Choose to love by forgiving today. Ask God to open your eyes to your own sin and how much He has forgiven you. Then do the same with your spouse.

If you don't sense that you have this forgiving heart or any of the other characteristics I've discussed in this publication, the place to begin is prayer. If you are a believer, confess your need before God and ask Him for the infilling of His Holy Spirit. "*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" (Gal. 5:22-23. Remember, it's God's good pleasure to give to you whatever you need to live a successful and fruitful life. Jesus promised, "*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened*" (Matt. 7:7-8). If you want real love and not some counterfeit in your marriage, ask the Lord

right now for a change of heart and He will give it to you.

If you have never made a commitment of your life to Christ, you must first begin by surrendering to Him. Ask God to forgive you and personally invite Jesus to come into your heart by faith. This is the only way you can have the power to do what I've just encouraged in this publication. God will answer your request for forgiveness and He will grant to you the power of His love. Bow before Him in prayer and watch what happens!

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For more information concerning the ministry of Pastor Steve Carr or for additional marriage resources for couples and counselors, please contact us at our web site www.covenantkeepers.org or by email at ccag@calvaryag.org or at 805-481-2320.

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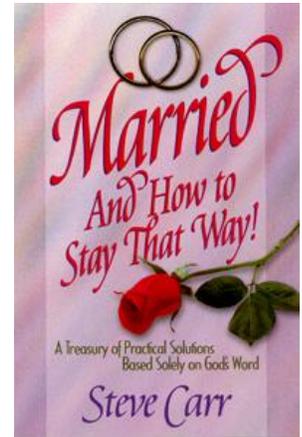
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