**Love: the most resilient aspect in relationships**

by Tom Marshall

In the Promise Magazine we have published two chapters from the book of Tom Marshall: Better relationships (1). On our website you can still read these chapters that deal with the vulnerability of confidence (2) and with honor as the most neglected aspect of relationships (3). In this special book with the increasingly topical theme, we look at love as the most resilient aspect in relationships.

**Introduction**

We usually make the two dangerous mistakes in our assessment of love in a relationship. We give it no room at all, for example in business life, or we put too much confidence in it, for example in marriage or in a parent-child relationship. “As long as we have enough love, everything will be alright”. In both cases we are mistaken. A part of the problem is that in our language use the word ‘love’ has been devaluated. I may say that I love my wife or that I love Italian food, Siamese cats, fishes, brass music and cross word puzzles. The question is however: *How*do I love my wife? Is it the same way as I love pizza? We often hear from the pulpit that we are to love God, but rarely how we are to do it in practice.

**We should know the difference between emotional love and the love we choose.**

Emotional love comes forth from love and affection. Feelings of tenderness arise in me when I see a small child, or romantic feelings arise when I see a beautiful woman, or feelings of pity, or a combination of love and sadness come up when I see somebody in need, etc. Such feelings are always by-products of events in our environment. They are important; it is a gift from God to our humanity. They are motivators or psychological motors. They set things in motion. The word emotion comes forth from the Latin word ‘movere’: to set in motion. But because they are a result of something else, they are morally neutral. The ‘feeling of love’ can lead us to both sinful lust and marital happiness. Emotions are to empower our behavior, but they are unreliable for guiding our behavior.

Feelings of tenderness or even pity can be pleasant and may become a kind of own satisfaction. When that happens, they degenerate to sentimentality. Emotions are intended to get us in motion; they are never intended to be a purpose in themselves. The other kind of love is a love by a *choice*, meaning: there is a choice attached to our will. This conscious choice gives love its moral value. I can choose to love. Therefore God says: “You shall love the Lord your God” (Deu.6:5) or “Love your enemies” (Mat.5:44). If love is based on feelings alone, then how can I ever love God, or someone who just stole my car? Love is a reaction that should accompany all our deeds. God, Who is the source of love, has clearly said how far the love for Him should go. “With all your heart and all your soul and all your might (Deu.6:5; Mat:22:37). Love that does not consist of warm feelings is just sentiment. Love that only touches our intellect is only admiration. Love that only comes forth from the will, is charity in its cold, negative meaning. Love has both a mental and an emotional element and a behavioral element as well.

**We should be thoroughly aware that we must love God first.**

Not because God wants to be the selfish ruler, or wants to be at the top of our priority list, but if we love God first of all, we are able to love other people in the right way. Our nature which has been created by God, is created for divine love. We have an innate need to receive love from a faithful and eternal source.

We have a deep yearning for the security of knowing to be loved. Not for any reason, for what we can or give, but only for ourselves. Only God can love that way. Only God loves from fullness and not from any need. He alone loves us, because of ourselves. Only His love is unchangeable, just as He Himself is. If this need for such love is not satisfied by God Himself, we will seek it in other people. But nobody is able to give it; no lover, friend, woman, parent, brother or sister. We impose an impossible task on our marriage, our friendships and other relationships if we expect divine love from the other person. We also sense instinctively that the value of love is so great, that we only want to invest it in someone who deserves it. Only one Person will never disappoint us: Jesus Christ. We can love Him with our whole heart, might, soul and strength and shall never be disappointed by weak sides of His character or deviations in His behavior. If we do not invest our love in God, we will expect too much from the response that we get on our love, for no human being is able to realize that.

We say or intend to say to our husband or children: “I love you so much, that you can never disappoint me”.  That is impossible. They have never accepted that order and therefore cannot fulfill such requirements. The wonderful thing is that if we love God above all things, our need for divine love will really be satisfied. In that way our need to love a perfect person will be fulfilled and therefore we are free to give and receive anything that human love has to offer: warmth, passion, friendship, affection and care.

**Giving substance to love**

The Bible, the best manual on love, is full of terms and concepts that express the dynamic and warm nature of love.

**Caring, love and action**

The fundamental character of caring is that it is shown in behavior. You cannot say: “I care” and then do nothing. The complaint that we often hear is: “Nobody cares for me”. That is precisely what is wrong in a relationship. If we replace the word ‘love’ in some Bible texts by ‘caring for’, then we view this issue in a new light. For example: “For God so cared for the world, that He gave His only begotten Son” (Jn.3:16), “We cared for Him, because He first cared for us” (1Jn.4:19), “This is the caring….., that God wanted to care for us, that He sent His Son as an offering for our sins” (1Jn.4:10). Caring is the most important test for the presence of love in a relationship. We need it very much. It is a form of love, like doctors who care for their patients; schools that care for their pupils; local councilors that care for the interest of the local community. A company will never flourish when the management does not care for its employees, its product and its clients. Caring for is not about having warm feelings towards people, but it is really taking care of their well-being so that we would do that also to ourselves. Common care leads to harmony and fruitful cooperation. If we become careless, the result will be: stress, disagreement and ineffectiveness.

**Kindness, love and brotherhood**

Love is always kind; that is its nature (1Cor.13:4). The root of kindness lies in a deep feeling of responsibility to one another. “In *your* brotherly kindness, love (towards all people)” (2Pet.1:7). The fact that God is good towards all people (Luke 6:35) has to do with the fact that we are His family. The Hebrew word for God as Redeemer is ge’ol (Isa. 60:16) and it literally means: who acts like a relative. If we are kind, we intuitively feel that another person would do the same for us in the same circumstances. Due to this feeling of affinity, kindness is close to sympathy (1Pet.3:8) and compassion (Micah 6:8). Unkindness hurts, just because it affects this particular feeling of affinity, which abandons us in a certain way of rejection and estrangement.

**Admiration – pleasant love**

Admiration often looks like a superficial and short-term response over which we have little control. Nevertheless it plays a major role in intimate relationships. It also increases intimacy. On the other hand it is difficult to be intimate with someone that you do not like. Admiration is one of the pleasant sides of love.

It expresses joy and delight that we experience in one another’s presence.

The Bible calls it: “To find favor” (Ruth 2:13, Esther 2:9).  Admiration consists of attraction, interest, affection, sympathy and other pleasant responses. It probably arise at the beginning when personalities and genders stimulate or complement one another and it increases thereafter by sharing and contact.

**Friendship – love that liberates**

The special quality of friendship must be valued more and better understood, certainly among Christians. We have a special assignment to be friends like Jesus was of those who have no friends (Mat.11:19). The offer of friendship is hard to resist. People love to be treated as friends, not as evangelical consumers.

The Bible gives friendship a high place. Compared to that, our modern society is cold and hard. The question is whether people normally will ever pass the level of being an acquaintance. The love of friends is based on equality. Friends are on the same level. Maybe that is the reason why friendship is a difficult matter for leaders. They have to step down from their pedestal, the privileges of their position and set their status symbols aside, in order to give and receive friendship. I remember the complaint of a man who tried to build up a relationship with his neighbor who was a pastor. He said: “I tried to be his friend but every time we see each other, he wants to give me pastoral of spiritual assistance”. Where men and women are real friends, the conflict about the question regarding who is the head, will disappear. What kind of friends argue with one another on the question of who is the boss or who has the last word?

This aspect of equality, which is God’s choice to be a friend to us, is breathtaking. “Abraham, My friend” (Isa.41:8) says God. He descends to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend (Exo.33:11). Can you imagine how Jesus was among the disciples and called them ‘friends’? (Jn 15:15). You cannot command a friend or demand of him to obey you. What a friend does is up to him or her. As far as friends are concerned, you give them confidence and transparency. They have access in your life. They do not have to wait for an invitation. We also do not need to dress tidy or perform a show for them. Arrogance and flattery do not go together with friendship. A friend is always allowed to say the truth. In this friends do have a unique position; they are close enough to be sensible to our emotions but also distant enough to be able to be objective. If necessary, they can be hard. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend”, “Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:6 and 17). You can almost feel how the writer shivers at writing down these word.

The love of a friend has perseverance. Just take a look at David and Jonathan; and Ittai and king David, Ruth and Naomi. Jesus says: “Greater love has no one than this that one lay down his life for his friends.” (Jn 15:13). There is a moral obligation encapsulated in friendship, that in life and death nothing can come between me and my friend. By becoming man, Jesus assumed the moral obligation to never desert or forsake us. Therefore He died and rose from death. Therefore He sent God’s Spirit so that we now can say together with Paul that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God” (Rom.8:38-39)

**Tenderness, love in its most delicate way**

Tenderness is another expression of love, which is close to intimacy, for example in the relationship of mother and baby, husband and wife or parent and child. The stronger person realizes that the weaker person is vulnerable and at the same time very precious. That’s why God’s attitude towards us is called ‘tender mercy’ (Lk 1:78). Therefore we ourselves are to be forgiving towards one another. “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32). The western macho culture has pictured tenderness as something weak and soft. That is a terrible mistake.

It often happens that a male person is not able to give or receive tenderness.

Because of that, his wife and children can suffer severely. But tenderness does not come forth from weakness but from strength (!). Therefore it is both protective and affirmative. It makes the one who receives tenderness to feel safe and loved, whether it concerns a child, woman or friend.

**Generosity, love expressed open-mindedly**

Generosity does not only involve money but also involves a lot of other important things such as time, attention, assistance, encouragement and honor. It gives real joy when you see that the other person is doing well. God’s nature is generous. He can give abundantly and we are to do the same (Jam.1:5; Mal.3:10). Generosity is the key to prosperity (Pro.11:25 and 2Cor.9:11).

**Compassion, love and sympathy**

Compassion is just sentiment if we are moved by someone’s need, but do nothing about it. It demands an imagination and the possibility to sympathize with what the other person is going through. With God compassion is attached to mercy, forgiveness and tenderness (Ex.34:6; Dan.9:36; Phil. 2:2). Christ was motivated by compassion to sooth the needs of the suffering and lost people. (Mk 1:41; Mat. 9:36). In Paul’s epistles it is attached to tender compassion, kindness, humbleness, meekness and patience (Col.3:12).

**Forgiveness, love as mercy**

No relationship will survive, let alone flourish, without the willingness to forgive. Forgiveness is to stop blaming the other party and letting him go without punishment or the desire for revenge. Forgiveness has to do with goodness or mercy, because the one who forgives is giving up something, which implies that he closes a dispute for once and for all. In relationships we run the risk that we keep tracks in our minds of what people have done to us and that we keep them as a back-up to support our evidence against them, should this ever be necessary. If that is the case, there is no real forgiveness. An enormous amount of tension in relationships comes forth from this kind of resentment. People have the feeling that they are still being blamed for the mistakes they made in the past. God’s forgiveness is such that He does not keep records of our sins that have been forgiven. They will be remembered no more (Psalm 130:3,4; Jer.31:34).

**The form of expression of love**

Love is dynamic, which means that it needs to have an object. You cannot just love. You need to have something or somebody to love. Love must be reflected. With children it must often find expression in many ways, in order to make them aware of it. I have met a lot of people who, looking back at their childhood, say with regret: “I think my parents have loved me in their own way, but I have never felt it as a child”.

**Love must be mentioned in words**

The words: ‘I love you’ are still the sweetest word we know. A friend of mine had two teenage sons who both caused him troubles. He said: “One day I took them both separately. I felt quite uncomfortable, for they are very tall guys, but I said to them: “I want to tell you this, which I haven’t said for a long time, but I really love you”. The same day the conflict between my sons was solved!

**Love should also be communicated non-verbally**

This can be in the way we look at each other, touch each other, the intonation we speak with to each other, etcetera. One of my sons was a teacher at a school with a lot of broken families. He told me that, when he walked over the school yard during the lunch break, the little children came to him, took his hands and said nothing but just walked with him around. After a while they left him again with satisfaction. They received something that they needed by holding a caring hand.

The more intimate the relationship, the more important love becomes and the more the emotional aspect comes up. This goes especially for marriage and family. In this context I note that the exhortation to love in the Scripture, is more often addressed to the man than to the woman. There is probably a good reason for it. Women are repliers. Love your wife enough and she will most likely pay you back with love. Paul says that it is the responsibility of the husband to treat his wife that way: “Husbands, love your wives as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her … that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph.5:25-28). As a husband I am obligated to surrender myself to my wife and in that way create an environment in which she can be totally filled. The wider the relationship, the less important the emotional side of love becomes. Then the aspect of the will becomes more important again. I can say from my own experience that I have never known warm, noble feelings for myself. Nevertheless I took good care of myself and gave attention to my needs, apart from my feelings. That’s how I have to love my neighbor, as I love myself, just as faithful and with perseverance.

**From: Better relationships, how new relationships grow and damaged relationships can be restored. Author: Tom Marshall**(1)

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Notes:

1. Tom Marshall: Better relationships. It was first published in 1992 by Sovereign World Ltd. In the Netherlands translated and published by Uitgeverij Shalom in Putten. (This article has been used with their permission). Tom Marshall was an architect who gave many lectures on management. He was a Bible teacher on pastoral care, healing and the Kingdom. Marshall was the founder of Kapiti Christian Centre and Servant Industries in New-Zeeland. He died in 1994.
2. Vertrouwen, de meest kwetsbare, [**https://stichting-promise.nl/specifieke-pastorale-onderwerpen/vertrouwen.htm**](https://stichting-promise.nl/specifieke-pastorale-onderwerpen/vertrouwen.htm)
3. Eer en respect, het meest verwaarloosde, [**https://stichting-promise.nl/pastorale-onderwerpen/eer-en-respect-het-meest-verwaarloosde-aspect-in-relaties.htm**](https://stichting-promise.nl/pastorale-onderwerpen/eer-en-respect-het-meest-verwaarloosde-aspect-in-relaties.htm)