Love as the First Essential of Marriage

"Love is patient and kind;
love does not envy or boast;
it is not arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice at wrong doing, but rejoices with the truth.
Love bears all things, believes all things,
Hopes all things, endures all things."
1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Christian marriage was designed by God as a basic part of how men and women should relate to each other. We were created by God for relationships, and Christian marriage is at the center of this design. This enduring relationship was instituted by God before sin entered the world. It was put in place for our good and God's glory. It was designed to press us toward godliness and to make society possible. I say Christian marriage to be specific in my biblical definition – marriage between one biological man and one biological woman. Any other definition departs from God's intention and purpose.

There are three basic foundations to a healthy, joyful, and life-giving Christian marriage. These foundations are love, service, and forgiveness. If you keep these fundamentals in focus, your marriage can maintain a strong even keel throughout the decades. But we all know that pressures, tragedy, and sin enter in to undermine our marriages. I strongly encourage you to return to fundamentals when you or your spouse know something has been lost from the joyful step of your marriage. Begin with these three fundamentals.

Love is the foundation of Christian marriage because love is the master virtue of the Christian life and the first fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We've all seen loveless marriages. Couples sitting at dinner on their phones, totally disengaged from each other. Couples that sit together with obvious distance from each other and seem to never touch each other. Couples that always make sure to have the kids between them when taking pictures. Couples that intentionally live separated lives by workplace or schedule. Couples that constantly take shots at each other to undermine and accuse. Marriages that have deteriorated into business relationships that revolve around raising children or preserving pensions. The love has gone out. Marriage without love is a tragedy, but sadly there are zombie marriages all around us – marriages that died long ago but go on in a state of active death.

If any of these things describe your marriage the world will tell you that divorce is the answer. You should go find someone else that will better meet your needs. But God hates divorce and selfishness. Instead, there must be a return to the foundations of Christian marriage to assess what has gone wrong and labor by God's grace to restore what has been lost. This is possible!

Let's begin with the origin of love. Love is the first and primary fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This means that in Christ the Holy Spirit *gives us* love. He teaches us how to love and by His sanctifying work strengthens us to love when we ordinarily would not. This means that

you cannot love your spouse in the beautiful and life-giving way that you should without the work of the Holy Spirit. Foundationally this means two things. First, if you have not put your faith and trust in Christ Jesus for salvation you are not a Christian, and do not have the power of God's Spirit indwelling your life. You are instead attempting to live the Christian life without the power of God to enable you. You will fail in this moralistic attempt. No man or woman can walk in the glorious and good ways of Jesus without the strength of the Holy Spirit. Second, the path to love in marriage is **not** directly through action toward your spouse. The primary step is toward abiding in Christ (John 15). Only when you learn to love Jesus will you learn to love your spouse in the perfect way of Jesus.

The primary way that a husband and wife walk in love together is by going in the same direction. When husband and wife are both seeking hard after Jesus this aligns their lives. They are both pulling in the same direction under an authority higher than themselves. This is never an equal pull. One spouse or the other will seek harder after Jesus at various times over the years of marriage, but this is where two are better than one. This is where you pray for, encourage, and point each other toward Jesus. When one is weak the other will be strong, but together you seek Jesus and in seeking Jesus your hearts become united in love. Be humble before Jesus in His word. Be together in church more. Be in small group more often with your spouse. Simply walking in these habits consistently over years will do more for the love and joy of your marriage than intervention counseling. These are healthy habits that cultivate love through spiritual formation and togetherness.

After committing to these basic spiritual steps, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 gives the practical map for how you ought to demonstrate Christian love toward your spouse. These steps are self-sacrificing and will require you to call out to Jesus for change in your life, but we also know that these ways are good and beautiful. We know that Jesus is right to call us to these ways. I strongly urge you to look carefully at this passage and labor over how to practically act in these ways toward your spouse. *By practically and authentically living these ways out toward your spouse you ARE loving your spouse*.

Patient / not irritable: Bear with your spouse and do not lose your temper – no matter what! Pray for self-control to tame your impatient, angry, and irritable tongue.

Kindness: Whereas patience may be the absence of anger, kindness turns this to the positive. By kindness you actively work to bless your spouse through actions that show love. This is also directly spoken of as a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Does not envy: In love you rejoice in every success and advancement of your spouse. You genuinely want to see their life blossom and grow. You never ever want to advance yourself at their expense. Their success is as your own success. Instead of envy, you should be your spouse's biggest fan!

Does not boast / is not arrogant: Boasting consists of exalting yourself at the expense of others. You raise up yourself by putting others down. This can never happen in marriage. In marriage you should instead be ever praising our spouse. You should go out of your way to publicly and privately speak highly of your spouse.

Is not rude: When you are rude, you are not putting others first. Rudeness displays a lack of self-control and specifically demonstrates that you don't care about embarrassing or offending your spouse.

Does not insist on its own way: It's one thing to express your desire about an issue of taste or conviction, but in love you should never insist that such decisions go your way. This is selfishness and shows a lack of respect for your spouse and their preferences. In love, there should be a give and take that shows respectful deference to each spouse at different times.

Not resentful: Love does not bear grudges. In Christ we forgive sins. I'll address that at length in a few weeks.

Rejoicing in truth: You should rejoice with your spouse in every victory, in every achievement, and in every step forward in their life. Look for ways to celebrate growth and progress in their life. Never relish failure or sin in their life, pressing them down further into the ditch when they are already low.

Bear, believe, hope, endure: When you vow "for better or worse" to love and honor your spouse, you are pledging yourself to this last section concerning love. Hard times will come. Storms will batter the house, but when your foundation is on Jesus the house will not fall. Always give your spouse the benefit of the doubt. Believe what they tell you. Hope in the future, setting your hope fully on Christ Jesus (1 Peter 1:13). Endure hardship together with your spouse. Face the trouble of the day as the two of you against the world – not the two of you against each other.

If you are walking with Jesus and actively living these things out, the Holy Spirit will bear beautiful fruit of love in your marriage. If you refuse these ways, and turn away from Christ, love will dry up in your marriage. Let's focus on the fundamental of love in our marriages!

May the love of Christ overflow in your hearts,
Pastor Vic