

Finding the Right One?

Matthew 19:1-6

May 11, 2008

Rev. Curtis J. Young

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Even the most genuine, most honest people are in for a shocking revelation after they marry. The love that brought them together is not sufficient to keep them together.

The euphoria of being in love, the warmth and pleasure of being together, the longing and satisfaction of just looking at each other, that flow so freely, that draws people together like some mysterious magnet, that urges them to commit themselves to each other, sort of fizzles.

Romantic feelings that seemed so natural have to compete with other feelings that are all too natural. There are sunny days and there are stormy days, days when you're feeling it and days when you're not.

The love that brings people together isn't going to keep them together.

This is like driving up to an intersection. Instead of slowing down, you speed up. You're not getting caught by some red light. The gas pedal hits the floor, the car revs to life. How accelerating!

The nose of the car just crosses into the intersection when suddenly the car starts to slow down. There's no more va va voom! The car begins to coast.

What happens next? Do you get "t-boned" in a terrible accident, or do you make it safely through the intersection, sort things out and travel on? It all depends. It all depends on the lights.

If you accelerated into the intersection when the light was yellow, bad choice! You ignored the yellow; you assumed you could power your way through. But you can't. So you're in the middle of the intersection. The light turns red. Bring out the jaws of life.

On the other hand, if you checked first to make sure there was a green light before you hit that accelerator, you should be fine. You'll make it through with time to spare, even if you have to coast.

So, if you are looking for a mate, this raises a question, doesn't it? "How do I recognize a green light?" What is it? The green light is what signals you that it is safe enough to pursue love, that you are not headed for a terrible accident.

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Before I answer the question, I want to build a case for it. So I am asking you to think hard and carefully. What is the green light?

Have you ever gone to a birthday party for a four year old, and seen who was invited? There are little boys and little girls. They talk together and play together.

If you asked them, "What are you?", they would tell you, "We're children!" They wouldn't say, "Four of us are girls and three of us are boys." They are immediately aware how very much alike they are. They share a wonderful identity. The differences are not nearly as important as the similarities.

Have you gone to a birthday party for a ten year old lately? If the ten-year-old is a boy, boys are invited. If a girl, girls are invited. In later childhood, even if they can't tell you what the differences are, boys and girls are more aware of the differences.

Of course this immediately raises the question, which are better? So boys are gross and stupid. Girls have cooties.

In adolescence, youth are even more aware of the differences, but for some reason deeper than reason, they're not as appalled at each other. They become curious, even interested in each other. They feel attracted in spite of the differences.

What happened? What happened can be explained in part by the rising levels of two hormones called estrogen and testosterone.

Then a certain young man meets a certain young woman, and there is conversation and time spent together, and romantic feelings. It's confusing and wonderful and scary and good all at the same time. They feel butterflies in their stomach. They feel like they are walking on air. They are twitterpated.

Now what has happened? This also can be explained by two hormones – serotonin and dopamine. Their levels rise as the attraction two people feel narrows onto each other. They produce the sense of pleasure and euphoria we call, falling in love.

Okay. So they marry and love happily ever after? Not quite. Within twelve to twenty-four months, those pleasure producing levels of serotonin and dopamine drop. The biochemical support for romance is withdrawn.

Things aren't quite as exciting. All those charming differences are just differences now. The cute explanation for why Mrs. Wonderful has fifteen different kinds of nail polish -- for any outfit, any mood, any occasion -- no longer explains away the clutter around the sink.

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The boyish way Mr. Perfect leaves his dirty dishes in the sink cannot excuse the odor coming from the kitchen.

The couple regresses. They have to. The only question is how far. Will they regress back to when they were ten year olds, or four year olds? Will they focus on their differences or the amazing identity they share? For many, this is a terrible struggle.

Even here the Creator provides biochemical support. The hormone oxytocin is released through loving physical contact to produce feelings of attachment and belonging, of shared identity.

God knew exactly what he was doing when he created men and women. He designed us so we would feel desire, pleasure, and security so men would leave their parents to be united to their wives.

There are significant differences between men and women: How we perceive reality, how we communicate, how we approach tasks, how we relate emotionally, not just how we respond physically.

The whole host of differences -- some related to gender while many are not -- can give rise to all kinds of conflict. So much of that conflict is based on the assumption, "My differences are better than your differences." What I think is smarter, what I feel is more insightful, the way I want to do it is better, the way I see things is superior."

What is lost is the fundamental similarity, the shared identity:

The Bible says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) The common humanity that men and women share speaks to identity, value and worth more than any differences associated with being male or female.

The New Testament underscores the recovery of this knowledge as part of our redemption. Paul wrote, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:26-28)

One is not better than the other. One is not superior. In worth and value there is equality before God. Treating my husband or wife accordingly is not doing them a favor. It is their due.

Even before a man and woman are husband and wife, more fundamental still, they are brother and sister. When they pledge themselves in marriage, they have pledged themselves to a fellow human being -- intelligent, capable, conscientious, thoughtful, perceptive, spiritual.

This shared identity is more fundamental than whether they think alike or work alike or feel the same way or perceive the same things or approach their faith in the same way.

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It is the awareness of the differences that attract men and women to each other. It is the recognition and appreciation of the profound similarity, of shared identity, that keeps them together. Couples happily married for years echo this when they say, "I'm married to my best friend."

Upon seeing Eve, Adam responded, "This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." He rejoiced that he had finally found a creature who was like him.

So, what is the green light? What keeps people together? What should you look before you put the peddle to the metal? Respect.

Is that person someone you deeply respect? Do you welcome the shared identity with him or her? Do you believe he is someone whose opinions, feelings, approach to life are as valuable as your own? Never mind how similar they are. How valuable are they to you? Do you say, with wonder, she is what I am. I am what she is. This is where respect comes from.

You can fall in love with a person you do not respect. You can marry them. The term "respect" is not in traditional wedding vows. There is the commitment to be faithful, loving and devoted. Where's the respect?

Respect. Let's think about that word. These (eyeglasses) are what some call spectacles, because I use them to see. Joe and I just saw Ironman. It was spectacular, well worth seeing.

"Spect" is a root that means to see. The people you respect are the people you look to. You look to them for counsel, wisdom, encouragement. You can tell the people who respect each other in a meeting. They're the ones who look to one another as if to say, "What do you think?" "Do you agree?" "How do you see it?"

People in love enjoy looking at each other. That makes them want to hit the accelerator. Far more important – and leading predictor of happiness in marriage -- is finding someone you look to.

Looking down on someone – that's superiority. Looking up to someone – that inferiority. In marriage we look to each other. The gaze is level, open, honest. That is respect. Do not marry someone you do not respect. And do not marry someone who does not respect you.

The language of submission in Scripture presupposes respect. Without mutual respect there is no submission. There may be oppression, or suppression, or domination. If so there will also be resentment, retaliation, and rage. But there will be no submission.

Paul ends his counsel to husbands and wives with, "the wife must respect her husband." (Ephesians 5: 33) Peter ends his counsel to husbands and wives by writing to the husbands, "and treat them with respect." (I Peter. 3:8)

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But is respect that essential? Is it the green light? What is the opposite of respect? Contempt, regarding someone as inferior or worthless or common, expressed as scorn, or icy silence.

Did you know that contempt, like fear or sadness, is an emotion that cannot be hidden? The muscles of the face involuntarily convey contempt when it is felt. The facial language of contempt is universal; it is not dependent on culture.

The point is, contempt is communicated, it is recognized, and it triggers a response. That response is resentment.

John Gottman is one of the premier marriage researchers of our time. Malcolm Gladwell's new book, Blink, reports that Dr. Gottman has identified four major emotional reactions that destroy marriages: Defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism, and contempt. The most toxic of the four is contempt.

It is not the loss of health, or wealth, or beauty that ruins marriages. It is the absence of respect. Respect is as naturally expressed, and as irrepressible, as contempt.

So, is he, or she, the one? Is there a green light? Do you respect him? Does she respect you? These are questions that only you can answer.