

Agency and Love in Marriage

By Elder Lynn G. Robbins

Of the Seventy



Church doctrine teaches us how to nurture and strengthen marriages as well as how to keep the romance in them.

The Lord's Way

The Wrong Way

Falling in love is a powerful thing. There have doubtless been more books written, more movies made, more songs sung about love and falling in love than about any other topic. Finding a person to love is the ultimate treasure hunt. Falling in love, one person reflected, is finding "someone just right, someone you loved like the best pal you ever had and the worst crush you ever had."¹ It can be so consuming that the desire to be with another becomes unrelenting, occupying your every thought, your every desire, your every minute of the day. It's intense. It's exhilarating. To fully portray the feeling on paper has always been elusive to even the most adept poets. To comprehend it, love has to be experienced. And oh, what a wonderful experience! He captures her heart, she captures his; there is a mutual victory and surrendering for both.

"The Lord has ordained that we should marry," said President Gordon B. Hinckley, "that we shall live together in love and peace and harmony. ... The time will come when you will *fall in love*. It will occupy all of your thoughts and be the stuff of which your dreams are made. ... You will know no greater happiness than that found in your home. ... The truest mark of your success in life will be the quality of your marriage. ... This choice [of a companion] will be the most important of all the choices you make in your life."²

Somewhere in the history of the English language the expression "fall in love" began to be used to describe the sublime experience of finding someone to love. While it is a beautiful idiom, there was inherent risk involved in selecting the verb *fall* because it mostly means accidental, involuntary, with no choice involved. And subtly, it has also led to the use of its distressing corollary, "We fell out of love," an all-too-common phrase heard nowadays as an excuse for a

failed marriage. "Falling in love" and "falling out of love" sound as if love were something that cannot be controlled.

Many who feel they are falling out of love with their spouse throw their hands up in resignation as if they were victims of an outside influence that controls them. They begin to wonder, "Do I really want to be married to this man (or woman) for eternity?" Having fallen out of love, as they suppose, they begin to drift apart, often saying things to hurt one another. "I don't love you anymore" is a common assertion. They tolerate one another for the children's sake, resenting one another; or they separate, believing their differences to be irreconcilable. The result is a damaged or destroyed family, another casualty of Satan's assault.

How could something so glorious and beautiful as falling in love end up in misery for so many marriages? What goes wrong?

A Love That Lasts

For some people, falling in love is a magical encounter, something that seems to happen at first sight. For others, it is a growing affinity and attraction toward another, like budding blossoms that flower into a beautiful bouquet. Though the first type of love may also bloom like the second, it is often merely glandular, a cotton candy kind of love that has no substance. While it may begin with warm cuddles in moonlit glades, it can soon grow cold as honeymoon memories fade and familiarity turns to faultfinding.

On the other hand, "divine" love, as President Spencer W. Kimball called it, "is not like that association of the world which is misnamed love, but which is mostly physical attraction. When marriage is based on this only, the parties soon tire of each other. There is a break and a divorce, and a new, fresher physical attraction comes with another marriage, which in turn may last only until it too becomes stale. The love of which the Lord speaks is not only physical attraction, but also faith, confidence, understanding, and partnership. It is devotion and companionship, parenthood, common ideals and standards. It is cleanliness of life and sacrifice and unselfishness. This kind of love never tires nor wanes. It lives on through sickness and sorrow, through prosperity and privation, through accomplishment and disappointment, through time and eternity."³

Many popular songs and films make reference to loving forever or to an everlasting love. For the world, these lyrics are simply poetic; for us, they are genuine expressions of our divine potential. We believe that eternal love, eternal marriage, and eternal families are "central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children."⁴ However, every couple will encounter some struggles on their journey toward this glorious destiny. There are no perfect

marriages in the world because there are no perfect people. But our doctrine teaches us how to nurture our marriages toward perfection and how to keep the romance in them along the way. No one need ever “fall out of love.” Falling out of love is a cunning myth which causes many broken hearts and homes.

“The family is falling apart all over the world,” President Hinckley said. “The old ties that bound together father and mother and children are breaking everywhere. We must face this in our own midst. There are too many broken homes among our own. ... Can we not do better? Of course we can.”⁵

A Conscious Choice

We know that any commandment by God involves agency. We can obey or disobey, but there is always a choice. Therefore, in Matthew 22, verses 37 and 39, when the Lord says, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind,” and “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” [Matt. 22:37, 39] He is not saying, “I hope you ‘fall in love’ with your neighbor.” The command is a directive, an appeal to the mind to make a conscious choice, involving the mind in reasoning and decision making. The Savior made it clear that love was a command to be obeyed—a command upon which “all the law and the prophets” hang (Matt. 22:40). To achieve a Christlike love we must overcome the natural man (see Mosiah 3:19), control natural impulses, and even love our enemies (see Matt. 5:44). This is a command that requires a decision.

Too many believe that love is a condition, a feeling that involves 100 percent of the heart, something that happens to you. They disassociate love from the mind and, therefore, from agency. In commanding us to love, the Lord refers to something much deeper than romance—a love that is the most profound form of loyalty. He is teaching us that love is something more than feelings of the heart; it is also a covenant we keep with soul and mind.

As we read his counsel to parents, it is obvious that King Benjamin was also aware that agency had much to do with love. “Ye will teach them [your children] to love one another, and to serve one another” (Mosiah 4:15). How can something be taught that cannot be learned? Once again, the scriptures are teaching us about a love that is to be discovered in the mind.

What about love between spouses, which involves the additional elements of romance and intimacy? Does this principle of agency and love, or the command to love, apply to marriage as well?

Once again, the Lord uses the command form of the verb *love* in “Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else” (D&C 42:22). It doesn’t require any guesswork here to discern that the Lord is giving

us a directive with a presupposition of agency.

In Matthew, the Lord said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor *as thyself*." In His mortal life, He demonstrated a perfect kind of love, then said, "A *new* commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; *as I have loved you*, that ye also love one another" (John 13:34; emphasis added). Loving as He loved is a higher form of love than loving "as thyself." It is a pure love that puts another higher than self. This pure love is the same love that should exist between husbands and wives. In Ephesians 5:25 [Eph. 5:25], the Apostle Paul exhorts, "Husbands, *love* your wives, [How?] even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it." How, then, did Christ love the Church? We have a marvelous definition of this love in 1 Corinthians 13:1-8 [1 Cor. 13:1-8] and Moroni 7:44-47 [Moro. 7:44-47].

As we study each attribute, we would be wise to consider how we are doing in our marriage or future marriage.

The Lord's Way

The Wrong Way

| Attribute | Christlike Love | Obvious | Not So Obvious |
|--------------------------------|---|--|--|
| "Suffereth long" (1 Cor. 13:4) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is patient and tolerant, does not criticize. Recognizes that spouse is progressing, is patient with imperfections. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is intolerant, ill-tempered, critical, cranky. Despite staying together, has no close relationship. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is impatient, complains, gives the silent treatment. |
| "Is kind" (1 Cor. 13:4) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is nice, thoughtful, interested in others. Is a Good Samaritan, comforts, is merciful. Can we "fall out of" kindness? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is mean, miserly, cruel, inconsiderate, unmerciful. Has a scowling countenance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is indifferent, remote, unconcerned, uninterested, unresponsive. |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| <p>“Envieth not” (1 Cor. 13:4)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is content, grateful for blessings. Rejoices in another’s gifts, talents, success. Is generous and offers help to those in need. Lives frugally. Knows the difference between needs and wants, avoids unnecessary debt. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is resentful, jealous, greedy, covetous. Fails to pay an honest tithe. Is selfish and withholds help (see Morm. 8:39; Mosiah 4:22, 24–25). Has a “my,” not “our,” money mentality. Incurs excessive debt. Has a spirit of speculation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is ungrateful. Is a partial tithe-payer. Is vain—sets heart on costly apparel, etc. Lives beyond income. Allows interest on credit cards to accumulate. Does not try to save food or money for future needs. |
| <p>“Is not puffed up” (1 Cor. 13:4)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is humble, meek, teachable. Does not speak vainly or seek attention. Happily serves wherever called. Lifts, praises, builds others up. Seeks the will of God. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is proud, eager for attention, self-centered, pompous, boastful. Murmurs against leaders. Is condescending with spouse or “holier than thou.” Is offended when advice is given. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not praise or give due credit to others. Aspires to positions. Is a know-it-all, is unteachable. Puffed up because of knowledge, talents, wealth (see 2 Ne. 9:42). |
| <p>“Doth not behave itself unseemly” (1 Cor. 13:5)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is courteous, well mannered, tactful, tasteful, reverent, respectful, mindful of others. Is clean, neat, orderly. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is discourteous, crude, disrespectful, indecent, improper, irreverent. Enjoys dirty jokes. Is boisterous: loud laughter. Leaves a place worse than it was found. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn’t say “please” or “thank you.” Has forgotten everyday courtesies. Is disorderly and unkempt. |
| <p>“Seeketh</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is tender- | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is demanding, | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn’t say “I’m |

not her own" (1 Cor. 13:5)

hearted, sensitive, compassionate, merciful, generous. • Seeks unity, kneels together in prayer, listens with empathy, avoids contention. • Thinks "we" and "ours." • Is approachable. • Seeks to please God.

controlling, selfish, manipulative, blaming. • Lacks unity, is contentious. • Thinks "I" and "mine." • Seldom listens, is aloof. • Seeks self-gratification, is self-indulgent. • Seeks the praise of men.

sorry." • Is reluctant to render help (as with household chores). • Is guilty of self-pity and advertises it. • Is uncaring.

"Is not easily provoked" (1 Cor. 13:5)

• Is forgiving, patient, calm, gentle, respectful. • Understands that anger is a decision and can be controlled. • Is a peacemaker (see 3 Ne. 12:9).

• Is irritable, spiteful, vengeful. • Is easily angered, often hostile and abusive. • Is defensive, responds with disgust or contempt. • Swears, has a bad temper.

• Argues over every silly little thing, is not open minded. • Disciplines in anger. • Does not bridle passions (see Alma 38:12).

"Thinketh no evil" (1 Cor. 13:5)

• Is nonjudgmental, respectful, helpful, pure, obedient. • Has "no more disposition to do evil" (Mosiah 5:2). • Is modest in dress, thought, speech. • Virtue garnishes thoughts unceasingly.

• Is cruel, conniving, deceitful, dishonest. • Indulges in pornography and inappropriate music. • Dresses immodestly. • Is an inventor of "evil things"(Rom. 1:30).

• Is judgmental, prejudiced, faultfinding. • Bears grudges, gossips. • Participates in jokes about intimate or sacred things. • Seeks improper intimacy with spouse. • Tolerates evil influences.

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p>“Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stays close to the Spirit through regular scripture study, prayer, obedience. • Has discovered that truth leads to joy and happiness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has an “eat, drink, and be merry” mentality. • Is indulgent, unfaithful, disobedient. • Is addicted to vices. • Justifies self, makes excuses. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is light-minded. • Is casual with prayers. • Is not diligent about gospel teaching or scripture reading in the home. |
| <p>“Beareth all things” (1 Cor. 13:7)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has moral courage, is bold in truth. • Turns the other cheek, is calm. (This does not mean that abuse victims should silently bear cruelty, or follow a spouse disobedient to God.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is insulting, defensive, irritable, touchy, grouchy, moody. • Is a coward. • Is ashamed of righteousness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is ungrateful. • Yields to peer pressure in compromising situations. • Is apathetic. • Is weary in well-doing. |
| <p>“Believeth all things” (1 Cor. 13:7)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly sees the eternal potential of spouse and forever families. • Sees others as children of God. • Holds fast to the gospel of Jesus Christ. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doubts spouse’s potential, is critical and cynical. • Is unfriendly to spouse. • Is condescending, intolerant. • Has let go of the iron rod, is not active in the Church. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is distanced, remote, inattentive, insensitive. • Is a hypocrite, lives a lie. • Goes to church, but wishes to be elsewhere. |
| <p>“Hopeth all things” (1 Cor. 13:7)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is an optimist. • Looks for the best. • Praises, builds up, expresses affection. • Continues courting spouse. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a pessimist. • Is a nagger. • Is a faultfinder. • Is unrepentant, in denial. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a fatalist. • Is bored. • Is neglectful. • Doesn’t feel worthy to pray for forgiveness. |

| | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>“Endureth all things” (1 Cor. 13:7)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn’t complain or murmur. • Is responsible and gladly accepts callings. • Sees growth in adversity. • Has a desire to learn and progress. • Is steadfast, knows life is a test. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is always complaining, murmuring. • Shirks or avoids responsibility. • Can’t keep a job. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is lukewarm or gives half-hearted effort. • Is lazy or spends too much time on hobbies, TV, etc. • Is afflicted with self-pity. |
|--|---|--|---|

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| <p>“Charity never faileth” (1 Cor. 13:8)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loves as Christ loves us. • Is supportive. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Falls out of love.” • Flirts with individuals other than spouse. • Is an adulterer. • Loves conditionally, based on spouse being healthy, successful, slender, maintaining good looks. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has wandering eyes. • Views spouse more as a burden than a blessing. • Dreams or fantasizes about individuals other than spouse. |
|--|---|--|--|

Love by Decision

While it is obvious that agency is a factor in the character traits listed by the Apostle Paul, it will be impossible to develop these attributes without the Lord’s help. Therefore, the Lord instructs us through Mormon to “pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ” (Moro. 7:48).

This is the love that is to be applied in marriages, in families, and with our fellowmen. A marriage based on this kind of love becomes the most romantic of all, generating eternal tender feelings between a husband and a wife. It should also be obvious that the heartache leading to divorce can be caused by the negative traits identified in the chart. These traits should be eliminated from our lives and homes.

Thus we have seen that while a person may “fall in love” with a spouse by emotion, the husband or wife progresses and blossoms in love by decision.

It is almost humorous to observe a young unmarried couple in love. After spending an entire day together, they are back together again on the phone that same night. It's sheer torture for them to be separated. Even in their thoughts they can hardly focus on anything else. Love begins to disrupt their studies or work. Everything else in life becomes a nuisance and an interruption that keeps them apart until they can be together again. In their minds there was never, in the history of the world, a truer love than theirs. We call this level of premarriage intensity “infatuation.”

After they marry, this intensity tapers off. Living under the same roof, they each begin to discover a few peculiar idiosyncracies in the other that they had not seen before. Some of these are irritating. The infatuation begins to fade. Those who have confused infatuation for love begin to worry and wonder if they are falling out of love. “Where is that level of passion, the fire I had during courtship?” they may ask themselves. Their relationship is passing through a common stage and is at an important crossroad. If they believe they have fallen out of love, they may begin to drift apart.

This is when a dose of true love is needed to rekindle a relationship that is being tested. True love may not restore the same emotional intensity of early courtship, but it will help love remain alive and blooming. Forty years later, Grandpa can go fishing, love Grandma dearly, but more easily endure a short absence from her than he could at a youthful age when smitten with infatuation. Their love is stronger, more mature, and still blossoming.

If a husband and wife are willing to apply the scriptural definition of love to their relationship, even a stale marriage and romance can be revived. Stephen R. Covey relates the following experience:

“At one seminar, after I’d spoken on the importance of demonstrating character within the family, a man came up and said, ‘I like what you’re saying, but my wife and I just don’t have the same feelings for each other that we used to. I guess we don’t love each other anymore. What can I do?’

“‘Love her,’ I replied.

“He looked puzzled. ‘How do you love when you don’t feel love?’

“‘My friend,’ I responded, ‘love is a verb. The *feeling* of love is the fruit of love. So love your wife. You did it once, you can do it again. Listen. Empathize. Appreciate. It’s your choice. Are you willing to do that?’

“Of course, I was asking this man if he was willing to search within himself for

the character required to make his marriage work. All our relationships follow the contours of life; they have ups and downs. This is why our families provide a critical measure of our character—and the opportunity, again and again to nurture it.”⁶

“I Love You”: A Commitment

Because love is as much a verb as it is a noun, the phrase “I love you” is much more a promise of behavior and commitment than it is an expression of feeling. “I love you” is a phrase we should be using in our homes much more than we do. If we don’t teach our children to use this phrase, they’ll be very uncomfortable with it throughout their lives and may not use it very much in their own marriage or with their own children. In my family, as we conclude our family prayer and scripture study in the morning, everyone gives one another a hug and each says, “I love you,” brothers to sisters, sisters to brothers, parents to children, and my wife and I to one another. It is a wonderful way to start the day and a good way to fulfill King Benjamin’s advice to teach our children to love (see Mosiah 4:15).

Scripturally, the Lord is very clear with us on this doctrine—you can’t “fall out of love,” because love is something you decide. Agency plays a fundamental role in our relationships with one another. This being true, we must make the conscious decision that we will love our spouse and family with all our heart, soul, and mind; that we will build, not “fall into,” strong, loving marriages and families. “Don’t just pray to marry the one you love. *Instead, pray to love the one you marry.*”⁷

Let us hearken to President Hinckley’s counsel: “I lift a warning voice to our people. We have moved too far toward the mainstream of society in this matter. Now, of course, there are good families. There are good families everywhere. But there are too many who are in trouble. This is a malady with a cure. The prescription is simple and wonderfully effective. *It is love.* It is plain, simple, everyday love and respect. It is a tender plant that needs nurturing. But it is worth all of the effort we can put into it.”⁸

It is only by our constant, committed effort that we will make the love we share with our spouse a constant for eternity.

[photo] Inset: Photo by Michael McConkie

[photos] Photography by Welden C. Andersen, Craig Dimond, Russell Holt, Kelly Larsen, Steve Tregeagle

[photos] Photography by Kelly Larsen

[photo] Inset: Photo by Steve Bunderson

Notes

1. Mary Roach, "Much 'I Do' about Mr. Right," *Reader's Digest*, Dec. 1998, 162.
2. "Living Worthy of the Girl You Will Someday Marry," *Ensign*, May 1998, 51; emphasis added.
3. *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (1982), 248.
4. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102.
5. "Look to the Future," *Ensign*, Nov. 1997, 69.
6. "Why Character Counts," *Reader's Digest*, Jan. 1999, 135.
7. Spencer W. Kimball, quoted in Joe J. Christensen, "Marriage and the Great Plan of Happiness," *Ensign*, May 1995, 64; emphasis in original.
8. *Ensign*, Nov. 1997, 69; emphasis added.

Rights and Use Information (Updated 2/21/2012) Privacy Policy (Updated 3/18/2014)

© 2015 by Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.