

15

BECOMING GREAT LOVERS

God calls us to love. This is to be the foundation, the very cornerstone of our lives as Christians. First we are called to love God, then our neighbor. Throughout the New Testament this command to love is repeated and amplified. We are to love our wives, our children, our brothers and sisters in Christ, our neighbors—who ever they might be—and even our enemies. And with God's help, with the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, we can love even those who hate or mistreat us. This love that we are called to offer, this Christ-like love is not dependent on the response of the person we are called to love. They can reject us or abuse us, and yet with God-given grace and help, we can still love them. We are simply called to love. This is *agape* love, a Christlike love. It is made possible through the Spirit of God living in us.

But there is a love that calls for a response, and that is the love of a husband for his wife. In this relationship, one ordained by God and meant to be unlike any other, our love is offered, and as it is returned, it is replenished and offered again, and on and on, until this love brings the two lovers into oneness, a true one flesh union. This is *eros* or erotic love.

GREAT LOVERS

By the world's standards, a great lover is a man who can seduce lots of women, or a man who make a woman respond passionately to his sexual advances and exploits.

Obviously, this is not the Christian standard. In the world's narrow limited view of sex, the physical is all there is or all that matters, and so the number of conquests or the quality of the orgasm is what really counts.

But for Christians, sexual love can be a far broader, far deeper, and far richer thing, and for the Christian man who is a great lover, the response of his wife includes the physical, but it is intended to be something much more magnificent, something that far surpasses the mere physical.

A man is a great Christian lover who loves his wife passionately and completely, expresses this love physically and verbally, and elicits a similar passionate response from her. This seems pretty simple, and it is. And it is consistent with God's word and how He made our bodies.

If this is the standard, does this mean that a single man cannot be a great lover? Yes, it does. He can love, but he can't be a great lover. How about the man who has a wife, who, through no fault of his, doesn't respond to his love and passion? Can he be a great lover? Sadly, he can't. I will touch on both of these situations later.

AGAPE AND EROS TOGETHER

Pope Benedict XVI has continued the great work of his predecessor, John Paul II, in calling the church—I believe the whole church—to a deeper understanding of human sexuality, an understanding so desperately needed in these times when the rejection of God’s glorious plan for sexuality has brought about such tragic consequences, tragic for women, for children, for society, and even for men. Pope Benedict’s very first encyclical (an encyclical is a church teaching of the highest authority for Catholics), entitled *God is Love* (*Deus Caritas Est*), a key theme of which is a call for the integration of agape and eros love in our marriages. I am indebted to my friend, Christopher West who, as he did with John Paul’s “Theology of the Body”, has brought the teachings of *God is Love* to the layman through his book, *The Love That Satisfies*.¹⁶

Many of us in our early Christian walk were greatly helped in our understanding of God’s ways when we learned that our English language was quite inadequate when it came to the word “love.” It used the single word “love” as a translation of several Greek words which described quite different kinds of love. There were the aforementioned agape and eros, and also philios (brotherly love). C.S. Lewis, in his *Four Loves* unfolded the deeper meanings of different kinds of love—affection, friendship, eros and charity—revealing how, as we enter into these kinds of love, we fulfill our Lord’s command that we love one another.

It is when we understand the different kinds of love that we see how, in bringing agape and eros together, we are given a picture of how God would have us love our wives.

We are to love (eros) them. That is to say, we are to delight in them, in their bodies, in their touch, in all the wondrous ways that make them feminine. We are to be physical and sexual with them, to want to enter into them and experience the extraordinary pleasures of sexual intercourse. We are to love them erotically.

In the marital union we should be able to declare, “I love (agape) you for who you are. I love (eros) you because you delight me so. I love (agape) you because you are God’s precious creature. I love (eros) you because you embody such feminine beauty. In my love (agape) for you, I long to see you blessed. In my love (eros) for you, I long for you because of the sensual feelings your touch sends through my body. I love (agape) you because God called us together. I love (eros) you because of the sexual intimacy we share. I love (agape and eros) you because God has given us *together* the power and privilege of creating new life.

Agape love is willing to pour out—regardless. Eros love longs for a response, for touch, for intimacy with the beloved. In its broadest sense, eros is a love that finds delight in another. It doesn’t have to be sensual. It is what causes us to want to hold a tiny baby, or to touch the soft cheek of a little child. It can be present with philios, when we desire to put our arm around the shoulders of a brother. It is the expression of the longing for connection that we spoke of in Chapter 2. The sensual is just one dimension of it, but it is a vital one in the marital union.

¹⁶ Christopher West, *The Love That Satisfies*, (West Chester, PA, Ascension Press, 2007).

For agape/eros love to receive its greatest fulfillment, the object of our love must respond. Hence, a great lover is a man who loves (agape) his wife as Christ loves the church, loves (eros) her with a passion that brings forth all of the sexual delights that God built into men, and whose love (agape and eros) brings forth a similar response from his wife.

EROS WITHOUT AGAPE

Our culture has captured eros and turned it into something totally self-centered and self-gratifying. As Christian men, we need to take back the erotic, and merging it into Christ-like agape, make it something far more splendid, an experience that is truly other-centered, but at the same time is able to satisfy our own great need for connection, completion, and creation, an experience that, because it involves the totality of both my wife and me, brings to both of us the joy and ecstasy of sexual pleasure at a level the world cannot comprehend.

The struggles we have with sexual sin are our bodies' demands for eros without agape. We have dealt at length with these struggles in earlier chapters. Now it might help to contrast the beauty of the blending of eros and agape with the meager offerings of eros without agape. Christopher West gives us an apt description:

What does eros look like when cut off from agape? At first there is a certain sense of liberation. Loving as God loves requires internal restraint of lustful self-serving impulses. Abdicating that responsibility removes what seems to many a heavy burden. But refusing the responsibility of disciplining and sublimating eros inevitably turns man in on himself. The meaning of one's sexuality shifts from other-focused to self-centered—from something “nuptial” to something “narcissistic.” Rather than ending in “communion” with others (spouse and children), eros removed from agape ends in “masturbatory self-absorption.” One's attitude shifts from “serve others even at the expense of myself” to “serve myself even at the expense of others.”¹⁷

Our pursuit of eros without agape is the root of all of our struggles with sexual sin. John Paul says that the lust of the flesh is a lack of God's love in sexual desire.¹⁸

CAN WE HAVE AGAPE/EROS FOR OTHER THAN OUR WIFE?

Let me address a question that might be coming from some readers right now. I keep speaking of loving our *wives* in this way. Can we not love another who is not our wife with this combination of agape and eros, and they love us in return in a similar way? How about the single man who is dating and deeply in love? How about the married man whose love for his wife has grown cold and whose love is now directed to another woman? How about the same-sex attracted man who feels he has agape and eros love for another man?

¹⁷ West, *The Love That Satisfies*, 84-85

¹⁸ West, *The Theology of the Body*, 292

I believe that there can be no true agape/eros love, as the Lord designed it, in any of these situations. A man who has met the woman who is to be his wife may experience a tantalizing taste of it, but for reasons I am about to explain, it cannot reach its full expression until the relationship has been given permanence before God and the church.

Pre-marital, extra-marital and homosexual relationships—this is what we are talking about here—cannot reach the level of a true agape/eros relationship because they lack one or more of three elements necessary for such a relationship: complementarity, commitment, and Christ.

Complementarity is the most obvious missing element in homosexual relationships. According to God's design, sexual attraction is rooted in a longing in the masculine in man to find its completion in the feminine in woman. Homosexual desire, on the other hand, is rooted in a man's longing for the manhood that should be his, but for some reason he feels is not a part of him. Although homosexual relationships can ease the longing for a time, the lack of a deep lasting satisfaction of this longing is attested to by the incredible levels of male homosexual promiscuity and the brevity of relationships that so common in the male homosexual life.

Pre-marital and extra-marital affairs, no matter how much they provide feelings of love, can offer only a poor imitation of the agape-eros love found where there is a commitment of the man and woman made to each other before God and their church.

So central is commitment to the marital relationship that we still speak of wedding vows made before *witnesses* as a part of the marriage *contract*. So critical was the element of commitment that it was for centuries enforced by both the church and the state; ex-communications (or worse) for adulterers, prison for deserters.

Women, by their nature, and reflecting their roles as carriers, bearers and nurturers of children, have greater need for security, for the "until death do us part" commitment than do men. *A man who truly agape loves his woman will want her to have this security.*

Some people are replacing "until death do us part" with something like "so long as our love shall last." I see this as being as great a perversion of true God ordained marriage as so called homosexual marriages.

Finally, and ultimately, true agape/eros love requires Christ. Agape love is the love of Christ. It is to love as Jesus loves the church and gave His life for her. We cannot love anyone with that kind of love without Jesus living in us and loving through us. And Jesus will not give us that kind of love in a relationship that He has forbidden, a sinful relationship.

Only in the marriage of a man and a woman can we find the full richness and blessings of agape/eros love.

THE MEANING OF EROS

I have been discussing a central feature of eros; its longing for a response from the one who is loved. But this is not a definition. What exactly is eros? It has meant many things in many ages; in our time and place it equates primarily with the sensual, and because of the way our culture has degraded the sensual, it has developed a strong negative connotation among people to whom morality counts. It has become enmeshed with lust.

One of Pope John Paul II's objectives was to take eros back from today's culture, and restore it to its original meaning. To do this he, as did many of the early church fathers before him, drew on the philosophy of the ancient Greeks who originally gave us the concept of eros. Here, he adopted Plato's definition of eros: *the interior force that attracts men to the true, the good, and the beautiful.*

In the presence of a woman to whom he feels attraction, a man is drawn towards her truth, her goodness and her beauty as expressed in her feminine nature. Infused with agape love, the man wants to give himself to this woman and become one with her. Absent agape love, the man wants to take her truth and goodness and beauty and use them for his purposes.

Ponder this a moment. You are drawn to your wife, or the woman who is to become your wife, because you find in her truth, goodness and beauty, with each of these qualities bearing the mark of womanliness or femininity.

The *truth* is in her when she embodies the feminine qualities with utter sincerity, without guile, without manipulation, without a false seductiveness. These qualities include, but are not limited to, responsiveness, gentleness, and a depth of sensitivity and understanding.

The special *goodness* of a woman is seen in her openness to receive and make a place in her heart and her life for you, for her children, even for strangers, and to nurture those she has drawn to herself. It is the qualities of motherhood reaching beyond her own children.

And finally *beauty*; it is the quality that provides the spark that ignites our sensual response. But also it encompasses truth and goodness as it shines forth in the woman's eyes, as it is manifested in her serenity. All of her feminine qualities come together in her beauty, and that is what ignites our erotic love.

MAKING US BETTER LOVERS

Alright, assuming all of this is true, does knowing it enable us to become better lovers of our wives? Yes, most definitely. For we will become better lovers as we search out these qualities in our wives, as we discover the embodiment of truth, goodness and beauty in them. I am convinced that these qualities are present in every woman. They are there because God placed them there when He made woman in His image. Remember my pastor's, "Now you are to love her because she is your wife." Loving her is seeking out, finding and focusing on these qualities. Regardless of the sins and

wounds that cover them up, these qualities are there and can be discerned by a Christian husband.

Did you ever notice how parents can so exaggerate the positive qualities of their children and all but ignore their negative qualities? (Of course, you and I have never done this). They are not doing this for bragging purposes. This is how they see their children, and it is for one simple reason, because they love them. Love draws us to whatever is good and true and beautiful in the beloved.

I want to make a special comment about beauty. Because physical beauty is such a significant factor in stirring up erotic feelings in us, and because beauty in a larger sense encompasses truth and goodness, our capacity to find the beauty in our wives is central. In this regard I discovered something a few years ago. One of the results of my having become totally and awesomely complete in my manhood, is that I no longer like to go shopping. When my wife and I go to the mall, if there is no home improvement store handy, quite often I will stay in the car and wait for her. One of the things I started to do to while away the time is to look at every woman who goes by and see if I can't see some level of feminine beauty in her. I have done this for a couple of years now, and in that time I have seen beauty in absolutely every woman I have observed. Regardless of the outer appearance, I have been able to see—perhaps in the Spirit—an inner tenderness, vulnerability, a softness, that is so uniquely womanly. I have seen it in the 75 year old lady hobbling by with her walker and in the 35 year old overweight mother wearing worn jeans and an obscene t-shirt with a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. As I look back on my years with Regeneration, I can recall being with some of the most “butch” lesbian women you could imagine and seeing the beauty of their tender, vulnerable, loving hearts hidden by the hard shell of self-protection they had created around them.

Christian men, if we seek to discover these qualities in our wives, the Spirit of God will enable us to find them, for they are qualities that God sees in them. And as an added bonus, this seeking will be an act of love that they will sense, and this will cause their truth and goodness and beauty to grow even greater. Women flourish when they are loved.

THE HEART ATTITUDE OF A GREAT LOVER

There is an old expression, a put-down of a man who thinks he is hot stuff for women. We'd say, “He thinks he is God's gift to women.” A proper put-down it is for any man who thinks that he has a lot to offer all women. But make a slight change in the statement and it can become a profound truth. Say about a man, “He is God's gift to *a woman*,” and if that woman is the one whom God intended to be his wife, he truly is God's gift to her.

This book opened with the statement that our male sexuality is one of God's great gifts to us, but it is a gift that by its fundamental nature cannot be enjoyed by us alone as its recipient. To experience the value and blessings of the gift, we must in turn give it away to another. For the married man, the essential element, the one thing above all others that

will maximize the joy of sexual experience, the thing that more than any other will make him a great lover, is his heart's desire that his body and his manhood be a gift to his wife.

When God was restoring my marriage after my years of unfaithfulness, I did not understand all of this, but God led me to pray each time before my wife and I came together, "Oh Lord, let me bring joy and pleasure to her." And of course, in this focus on her, I was being set free from myself—and my performance—free from any chance that I was using my wife for masturbatory release, and free to experience the true abandon in which a husband and wife achieve true union. It was in God's answer to this prayer that my wife and I were able to give ourselves and receive the other with passion.

The Christian life is filled with paradoxes; to live we must die, to receive we must give, to be loved we must love. To experience the true joy found in God's gift of manhood and sexuality, we must be willing to give our manhood and sexuality to our wives.

Married men, develop the attitude that you are God's gift to your wife and amazing things will happen. Single men, an excellent way to discover if you are to marry a specific lady is to ask yourself, "Can I be God's gift to this woman?" This is the road that leads to becoming great lovers.