

Part 2: Love's Vulnerability

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September 8, 2024

As my wife and I were sharing the story of our engagement with our kids the other week, I mentioned how nervous I was to ask their mom to marry me. Owen, my oldest boy cringed the whole time, and when it was done he said, "I'm so glad I'm not a girl. That mean's I'll never have to reject someone's proposal."

To which my six year old, Ellie, added, "Yeah, and I'm glad I'm not a boy so I don't have hair growing out of my face."

But what makes their humor so funny is the ironic truth of it. It's funny because it's said by children—but it's true in that we have fears regarding rejection and appearances. We know in our core that love exposes us to a certain kind of vulnerability which can end so painfully.

Love and dating seem to live on the razor's edge of warming or wounding our hearts. C.S. Lewis captured this tension saying, **"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up in a casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; [but] it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."**

It seems we have to choices—be heartless, or risk being heartbroken.

We have just begun a study through the book of the Bible called, "The Song of Songs," which is a divinely inspired album of love songs. And today we begin track two: a song that captures those same notes of vulnerability, appearance, and fear of rejection.

Lewis' quote is so powerful because no one is able to do what he recommends. No one can cage up their desire to love. The Bible tells us, this is because of how we were made. We were made in the image of a loving God.

For all eternity, that's what God did inside the Trinity. Augustine attempted to summarize the affections of the Trinity when by introducing the Father as the lover, the Son the beloved, and the Spirit the one who upholds the three in love. Trinitarian love was infinite, flawless and perfect.

Made in the image of this God, the capacity and compulsion to love is essential to who we are. The problem is that we are not the perfect creator, and because of our sin, we are no longer in perfect relationship with one another.

And here, love gets complicated. This is where love gets risky. We are far from God, the safest place for our love, and sin prioritizes self-love over love of others. We feel this in friendships, sometimes even in our families, and most certainly in our romantic thoughts.

While our text today deals with the vulnerability of romantic love—it holds out the promise of affirmation and comfort for love in any area. In a world of limited lovers we see love’s ideal today: **Biblical love is faith properly placed.**

What we expect and hope for in love is the result of what we believe about ourselves, about others, and ultimately about Jesus himself. We will walk through each of these today as we see **Love’s Vulnerability, Love’s Affirmation, and Love’s Adornment.**

I’m sure many of you can relate to turning on the TV or your radio only to find the volume cranked up. That’s how the Song opened last week wasn’t it. It started off hot and loud out of the gate as our lady sang of her beloved—but we learn of her desire before we even meet the characters.

But our track this morning slows down and we learn the backstory of our leading lover. Despite their relationship, doubts and fears still linger in her mind. This is our first point this morning: **Love’s Vulnerability.**

The Song of Songs features three primary voices, there’s the voice of the lady lover, there’s the voice of her fiancé—the beloved, and there’s the voice of the broader community—often called “the Daughters of Jerusalem.”

Last week, after our lady sang of the beauty of her man, these ladies picked up and echoed her sentiment: **Song 1:4b**, “We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine.”

The Hebrew grammar reveals that their words are not directed at the couple as a whole, but only to him. In other words she just got done talking about how awesome her man is, and how her deepest dream is that she would be together with him in marriage—and it’s met with an affirmation of how amazing *he* is.

We can almost hear her self-conscious disappointment as she seems to explain and justify why she might be left out of their praises: **Song of Songs 1:5-6**, “I am very dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me. My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept.”

Her backstory reveals that she’s self-conscious about two things: her physical appearance, and her broken relationships.

Regarding her appearance, she’s dark. This statement isn’t about race, it’s about perceived value of physical beauty in her day.

In case it’s not self-evident, I’m not a woman. But I have four women in my home. And I have great sympathy for them. The world is quick to define what an attractive woman looks like but it seems the target is often incredibly high and always moving. In other periods of history, plump was perfect, and skinny was unsightly. In a more recent era, thin became in. And now it seems that you can’t win for trying: if you’re too skinny, you’re unhealthy, if you’re overweight you’re unhealthy, if you’re overweight and you try to lose weight, you’re unhealthy mentally and you should have accepted the weight you were at.

These external appearances not only make a statement about how you look, but who you are. For instance, thin women in earlier ages were seen as less important because they couldn't afford enough food to be well-fed. Today, a pale complexion means that you might not be able to afford tanning salons, or vacations—and therefore might be a pencil pusher without much of a future. In the day of our text, the opposite was true. If you were darkened by the sun, it meant that you were too poor to be inside. You were a laborer, and a lower class one.

Because of this, she's afraid to have people look at her. She knew there would be no Instagram celebrating her beauty, nor any interview on her lifestyle. She knew she didn't measure up, and yet— young ladies specifically—notice how despite all that she knows she is lovely.

The world will always try and define you based off of how you look. And while this young lady is aware and even burdened by the pressures around her—there's an anchor to her identity that is not her physical beauty. What is that anchor? We will come back to that in a bit.

She goes on to explain why she is dark, and here we see the messy nature of her family relationships: **Song of Songs 1:6b**, "My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards but my own vineyard I have not kept."

Now we know why she is dark: it's because of her broken family life. Her relationship to men is especially strained. We never once read of her father in the book—and here her brother's aren't even introduced by her as her brother. She shows their relational distance calling them, "my mother's sons."

In those days, wealthy families would hire lower class families to work their vineyards and her brothers forced her to work the field. Why? We aren't certain, she simply tells us they were "angry" with her. But from what we will learn about the brothers later, I think the most reasonable explanation is that it was their misguided attempt to protect her.

With no father being around, and with them being occupied with their own labor—they were perhaps worried that she might be promiscuous herself, or that she might be unprotected and assaulted. So they put her to work in the fields and it accomplishes two things: it would keep her busy and therefore safe, and it would also darken her skin and make her less attractive to others.

Maybe they pursued a right end with the wrong means, maybe it was intentionally harmful. But regardless of the intent—she was hurt and alienated by it. It also meant that she was unable to keep up her own appearances. The literal vineyard was kept, but the vineyard of her body was not.

There's no beauty products in her hair, there's no Brazilian waxing for the wedding night, no pedicures or perms. In verse two she talked about how lovely he smelled, but here we can assume that she smells like a field.

And so is the tension of love's vulnerability. In one breath all she wants to do is blend in and not be seen, but in her very next breath—all she wants to do is be seen by her man.

She sings to him, **Song of Songs 1:7**, "Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon; for why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flock of your companions."

Everyone's eyes seem to be on her and she's uncomfortable, but her eyes are like a tractor beam for him: "the one who her soul loves." Her hope is that unlike so many others in her life, he will see her differently. She desires to go on a lunch date with him. But notice her call to him is still cautiously guarded.

She doesn't mention her appearance, perhaps not to bring more attention to it. She doesn't mention her fear of being seen by others, or her nagging insecurities—she doesn't want to be seen as weak. So she asks him as innocently as she can the exact location of his lunch break.

Twice she asks him to provide detailed information and justifies it because she doesn't want to appear lost. "Tell me where you are because I don't want to look silly asking for directions!" But what's really at play is that she is craving acceptance in a world of insecurities, and as much as she hopes to find that acceptance from him—there's a world of critical onlookers that separate them.

"What if they start talking about my family background and he realizes how crazy my family is? What if those jealous girls over there say, 'You're too good for her!' and he realizes that it's true? What if I get there, and no one sees me, but he sees me and he doesn't want me?"

Whether it's writing a proposal to your boss, or proposing to your girlfriend, we all know the sheer terror of vulnerability that comes the moment those words leave our mouths. Life in the real world is fearful. It's brutal and cutthroat.

Maybe you're one who feels this same tension when it comes to approaching God. You are worried what others will say, or you're worried of what he will say.

But here we see the wonderful comfort of biblical love as her beloved answers with our second point: **Love's Affirmation.**

In light of her request he could have responded in a few ways. He could have been, as many husbands are, blind to it. He could have just given the address and thought nothing of it. He could have sensed her insecurity and coddled it saying, "That's ok, you stay home, I'll see you later. It's best to not be seen." He could have taken advantage of it in an abusive way, "You're right, you're nothing without me. But I want everyone to know that you belong to me so get up here."

But this man, knows his girl. He senses the insecurity behind her inquisition and he draws her out without coddling or crushing: **Song of Songs 1:8**, "If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the shepherds' tents."

Here he stills three fears in her heart.

First, he assures her that she can find him. When he says, "If you do not know," he's saying playfully, "come on silly-head, get out here, I miss you too. You know where I am. You know how to get to me. Come! They might not want to see you, but I do. They might find you out of place. But I don't. You can always come to me."

Men, we have insecurities that demand their own sermon, but take note here and try not to be dense. Know the one you love. Anticipate her fears and her needs, and draw her forward so that she might see God's faithfulness and your ever constant love for her.

Second, he reaffirms his exclusive love for her.

"O most beautiful among women," he calls her. The Hebrew grammar highlights the intensity of the words. She is one of a kind. And he tells her that. I once heard on a sitcom a husband say, "I told my wife I loved her on her wedding day, and I'll let her know if that changes." What a stupid comment!

The world is talking to those who we love—are you? He's not offering empty or vain flatteries—he's affirming his astounding love for her and he means it.

He says, **Song of Song 1:9-10**, "I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots. Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels."

Now, it would not really be a confidence booster today to tell the girl you're interested in that she's built like a horse. Braver men have certainly tried, I'm sure. But culturally speaking during this era her two fears would have been quelled: she thought she was of lowly status—but to him she's royal. She thought she was dark, but to him, she's like black beauty. The most beautiful horse in Pharaoh's stable. Beautiful, prized, and valuable.

He doesn't just say she's beautiful in general, but as intimately as she knows her own body—he knows it appropriately. He doesn't start talking about her intimate parts. Her beauty is not based off of merely her sexuality. He is content, as we should be today, with her modesty. The cloaks the laborers would have worn would have covered all but their feet, hand, neck and face.

He didn't affirm her by saying, "I bet you've got some beautiful stuff under that cloak." He is not only content with her modesty but he's captivated by it. He says, "Today, I was day dreaming about those cheeks, let me tell you about them. And don't even get me started on that neck..."

He sees her appropriately, which is to say he sees her intimately. And this leads to the last affirmation.

Thirdly, he will be her shelter.

She was fearful of being seen in the field by his shepherd companions, but he calls her to the shade beside his tent. Here we notice how biblical love is at its root self-denial. These two are not yet married, but are engaged and deeply in love. She is coming to him in a remote field and she's insecure about her body. It would be easy for him to say, "I'll show you what I think of your appearance, come on into my tent."

But, he doesn't. I'm sure he would have liked to. But he refuses to be another man who uses her for his own pleasure. He instead invites her into the shade beside his tent.

From fear of others, she finds his welcome. From fear of sexual exploitation, she finds appropriate affection. From fear of the sun, she finds shade. From fear of her history, she finds the promise of new beginnings. From the vineyard to the pasture. From grapes to goats—here with her man is not only a present comfort, but future hope. Hope for a relationship with a man that doesn't harm, and this first step of vulnerability was met with the fruit of love.

And here is where I want to pause for a moment and go back to the question I raised earlier: "How can this woman, with so much going against her relationally and physically still say at the same time, 'I am lovely'?"

We ought not insult the suffering of this woman and say that it's because she looked at all that had happened to her and simply pulled herself up by her bootstraps and said, "I'm lovely." Her sorrow, her trial, her culture was real, and really weighty.

So how then can she have such confidence amidst criticism? Because, she's been told she's lovely.

There was an outside voice, an outside experience, one that in her deepest fears wondered if it were too good to be true! "If I understand my own issues, and I do, and if I understand the cultural expectations, and I do, how can *he* love *me*?"

She is able to cut through the noise of her own heart and make bold steps because she has been reminded that she is loved. She is more than the sum of her own story.

He loves her, and even though she can't know for sure why—his love supports the delicate truth that the world often crushes. There's an even greater mystery when we consider how Jesus loves us sinners. We were not darkened in skin—we were darkened in soul. And it wasn't the changing covers of a magazine that said we didn't meet the standard of beauty—it was the infinite righteousness of God himself.

Yet he loved us. Why? Not because of what is in us, but because of what was in him.

This is the difference and the distinction between human love and divine love. Human love is mysterious, but it's always rooted in something attractive about the other. Human love demands a reciprocal attraction—both romantically and in deep friendship.

God alone is capable of self-satisfied with love. He didn't create because he was lacking love, he created because he is overflowing with it! He is the only one for whom self-love satisfies! Because we are not God, our love naturally looks outward hoping to find an external object to satisfy it. That's why we can no more put our love in a chest and seal it up any more than we can choose to stop being a human. But that's where the risk lay! What if we aren't satisfying to the one in whom we hope to be satisfied?

Because no human is perfect, we cannot expect human love to satisfy our deepest needs. But when we turn to God as the perfect one we realize that we are unable to satisfy him. We are not pleasing. Our sin is offensive. Our sin is ugly. Our sin is damning and deadening. But here's the beauty of God's love: He doesn't need us to satisfy him. He *is* satisfied, and he *is* love. So because of the great love by which he created us, and in which he loved us, he set out to redeem what he had made by wiping away the mess of sin we had made.

The Triune will of Father, Son and Spirit agreed to secure our redemption through the means of the cross because of his love. We are loved because God loves us. And because God loves us, he has sent Jesus to save us and wash us. Jesus died not because we are beautiful, but because he is beautiful. His love for us is the objective standard of our beauty. His love for us is our identity. In Jesus, every Christian can say, "I am dark, but I am lovely."

As simple as the woman is in the text, her beloved points out her jewelry. If you're worried about rejecting before a wedding, I wonder how you might feel standing before God in eternity. But if your faith is in Jesus, notice the words of affirmation we might cling to: **Isaiah 61:10**, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels."

If you know yourself truly, and if you know the world is more capable of criticizing than comforting, then come to the husband who loves you securely. Come to the one who doesn't wait for you to be beautiful, but he declares you beautiful, covering you with his righteousness, and continues through the Spirit to make you more and more beautiful. Much of our relational fear stems from the world's pressure on us to be like Jesus, or our pressure on our lover for them to be like Jesus. But there is one Jesus, and if you don't know where to find him—now you do.

And lastly in closing, notice **Love's Adornment**.

In Isaiah 61 we saw the Jesus will adorn the church with jewelry. In verse 9-10, the beloved speaks of the woman with modest jewelry, but notice how the "others," the daughters of Jerusalem, pick up the chorus in verse **11**, "We will make for you ornaments of gold, studded with silver."

Notice how these others are no longer blind to the woman. They see her, they praise her beauty, and they offer to help make her even more beautiful.

It's often a mystery as to why two people fall in love. Somehow, there was something in me that Sarah saw as worthy of her love. And I'm as shocked as you all. But it's no mystery as to why these others are now moved toward the woman: they saw her how *he* saw her. The affirmation of his love not only transformed his lady lover, but it transformed the community itself.

And if the declaration of a bride-groom over his fiancé can change the way the community responds to her, then how much more does Jesus' declaration of love toward his church change the way we should see each other.

John reminds us **1 John 4:11**, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." We love others because Jesus loved us.

Love lives and thrives in community. In the church, we will often run into people who we see and judge according to their relational history or appearances. By human standards, that's the most natural response. We can't help it.

But when we see how Jesus loved us—then we can begin to see others differently too. The gospel gives us new eyes not only for ourselves, but for everyone else who Jesus loves. And our response should be to join in the work to make one another all the more beautiful.

This is how Paul speaks of the church in **Ephesians 4:15-16**, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

Our sin makes us vulnerable, Jesus makes us confident, but it's in the midst of the church and by the help of the Holy Spirit that we are called to dress up one another in holiness. In this way, this group of imperfect sinners saved by grace, remind one another of the only love perfect enough to satisfy. It's that love which makes marriages last, and which makes the church to sin. Here, our comfort is all that we share in Jesus.