

Part 8: Love That Refuses to Settle

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Man is an ambitious creature. From the Tower of Babel in biblical times, to the Coliseum in ancient Rome—we are always seeking to build the best and biggest of something. My wife and I visited Burj Khalifa when we were in the Middle East. Reaching up over 2,700 feet, it was the tallest building in the world. That fact was plastered on every sign and monument in the building.

But, if you were to ask anyone in Dubai what the tallest building in the world was—they would all tell you, “Not Burj Khalifa.” Given the scope of my sermon today, I thought it would be a great illustration. I was going to find the building that was taller than Burj Khalifa and say, “Our desires are always passed up.”

But to my surprise, when I sat down to do my research—it is still the tallest building. However, Saudi Arabia, has been building Burj Jeddah—a tower which will best Khalifa by over 500 feet. The irony is, this building project has yet to finish. It was started in 2013, and when we were in Dubai the construction on the building had been paused for various reasons.

So, even though Burj Khalifa is, and will continue to be the tallest building until that one is finalized—everyone knew in their hearts they had come up short. What they had was great—but they knew inevitably—it wouldn’t be enough.

Despite man’s ambitions—the story of humanity is always one of settling too quickly. We’ve been working through the book of the Bible called, “The Song of Songs.” The only single topic book of the Bible—one that cautions us three times to not stir or awaken love until it pleases.

On account of this—we might think that God is frustrated with our over zealous desires for love and romance. But what we see in the Bible is what was illustrated in Dubai. God is not trying to keep us from going too far with love—he’s attempting to keep us from settling too early.

Because we are made in the image of God, every aspect of our human experience is being called to find its end in something far deeper than what the world offers. C.S. Lewis, the author of the Chronicles of Narnia, put it well when he said this: “It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

If we want to find love, where do we look? Well, single, married, or otherwise—our passage today drives past the skyscrapers of the world and leads us into the blazing center of our satisfaction: the glory of God. Everything good we enjoy in the flesh in this world is a place holder for the goodness of God we are called to experience by faith now, and in full in our eternal hope.

This is our main point this morning: **The glory of God is the beauty of love.** To help us see this surpassing weight we will focus on five aspect of love: **Love can't be untended, Love can't be avoided, Love can't be ended, Love can't be afforded,** and lastly **Love freely obtained.**

Because our text is so brief, and so beautiful, I want to read it once more for us this morning. I've included verse five with our reading today because it helps frame the speaker and the tone:

Song 8:5-7, "Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved? Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in labor with you; there she who bore you was in labor. Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house he would be utterly despised."

Let's begin by looking at our first point this morning: **Love can't be untended.**

The wife sings to her husband in **Song 8:6a**, "Set me as a seal upon your heart as a seal upon your arm."

The greatest commandment is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength," and here he appeal to her lover's heart and arm is similar: "Set me all over your heart and strength."

She uses the illustration of a seal which, like a signature today, was meant to imply a sense of possession and authentic relationships. And she's saying, "I don't just want to be all over you in the bedroom, I want to be all over you in all of your life."

But notice how she's asking him to do the work. She is the seal, but he is the one who is asked to place her securely and centrally in his life. Because of the weight of love which we will see in a moment—her plea is for him to do the work of tending to the relationship. Despite the joy of love they've declared—she's asking for him to increase and continue in the establishment of their love.

It's a reminder to all of us, that romance and love is meant to be tended to. It's not a one-time fee we pay, and then neglect the rest of our lives. If you look up "how to keep romance alive" online, you'll find lots of advice. But notice what she is asking him for here--she's not asking for more dates, she's not asking for more one on one time, she's not pining for jewelry or vacations, she is pleading with him that just as frequently as he puts on his pants in the morning--he places her in his affections.

Our world treats affections, emotions and desires as if we are helpless victims of their force. We love what we want to love, and if we feel like we have to work to love something we are told that's not love. But do you have any idea how many times the Bible calls Christians to direct our own emotions?

A non-Christian has little capacity to resist whatever their strongest urge is. But the Christian is given the Holy Spirit who empowers us to be masters of our affections instead of slaves to them. Consider Jesus' words in **John 13:34**, "A new commandment that I give to you, that you love one another." Jesus doesn't wait for us to accidentally "fall" in love with anyone. He commands us to love—a command and exhortation that is given dozens of times in the New Testament.

Moreover the Bible tells us not to love the things of the world (1 John 2:15) and compels us to desire what is holy (1 Corinthians 12:31). And consider the thoughtfulness Paul shares in **Philippians 4:8**, "Finally, brothers, whatever is pure, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Love comes over all of us with a force that we often don't expect. But if we want love to grow, like captains of a sailboat--we must busy ourselves in directing it away from what is sinful and selfish and towards that which is godly and satisfying.

Spouses, put down your phones and set up your spouse in your heart and in your actions. Desire them more by desiring them more! The security we long for in love doesn't come from a gold band, but from a bonded heart--sealed with all of the affection we can muster, and sustained by the Holy Spirit himself.

Husbands, your wife knows what you're passionate about. But does she know you're passionate about her? Consider this perhaps as a prayer point to meditate on this week.

Second, **Love can't be avoided.**

Song 8:6b, "For love is stronger than death, jealousy as fierce as the grave."

If you've ever watched the Marvel movies, you know that the biggest of all baddies is known for one ominous line: "I am inevitable." The plan of Thanos would come to bear.

The wife here speaks with a similar sort of anxious fear. Why does she want the certainty that he will cultivate and keep his love for her? Because the force of love is inevitable, it can't be avoided. We are born to love—this is a good thing!

We love because an eternally loving God made us! But the problem of sin is that it has hijacked the steering wheel of love. Where love was meant to be directed to God and others—now our love is off the tracks careening towards our own desires, wherever they call us.

In the fitness world there's a phrase, "Use it or lose it." But this is true of every muscle in our body except our heart. We are always using it. We are always loving. That's what lead John Calvin to famously call our hearts, "idol factories." Just as water flows downhill, just as leaves change in the fall, we will love.

Which is why the lover is so eager to call her husband to direct his love. He will love something—and she's asking that it would be her.

We will all seek out love. The world holds up sex as the love we need to finally satisfy us. Which is why the world needs to see the church, and why the church needs to see love in the Bible! There is no single aspect of human love which saves us or satisfies us. But when we learn to direct our love to the sole source of it, to God the Father through faith in the Son, we show the world that though it cannot be avoided—it can be obtained!

We can gather together as young, old, men, women, married, single, divorced, widowed and say: "Yes, but we've found what we've been looking for. And together, we can love one another out of the overflow of that infinite well of love."

Third, **Love can't be ended.**

Song 8:7, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

Here is the beautiful promise of "'Till death do us part." Biblical love in marriage is built for the long haul. And while the Bible does give grounds for biblical divorce—it is meant to be a last resort only to be pursued with heavy hearts, slow actions, and wise counsel.

Just because we are dedicated to loving our spouses, sealing them upon our hearts day after day, doesn't mean that it will always be easy. But it does mean that God will give us the strength we need to do all he's asked us to do.

Ecclesiastes reminds us **Ecclesiastes 4:12**, "A though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him--a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

In marriage, arithmetic breaks down. $1+1=3$. A Christian husband and wife are called to love each other with selfless, costly and enduring love—but their effort is joined by the unlimited power and grace of the Holy Spirit.

When I facilitate weddings, right before the vows, I quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer who says, "From this point on it is no longer your love that sustains your marriage, but your marriage which sustains your love."

Nothing washes away this foundation. As life happens many waves will break upon the walls of a godly marriage--and by grace--the foundation will hold. If you want to make it through these storms in one piece, you must wrap your mind around the idea that biblical love is self-sacrificial choice.

I love the story of the great theologian B.B. Warfield. As the president at Princeton Seminary, he was a staunch defender of biblical truth in the face of increasingly progressive liberal theology. But it was his beautiful marriage, not his bright mind, which displayed his true might.

Shortly after marrying his wife, Annie, she suffered an injury which left her an invalid until her death. And for nearly three decades, B.B. hardly left the campus of Princeton, leaving the home only to teach classes and then to return and care for his wife. It was said that Warfield "had only two interests in his life--his work, and Mrs. Warfield."

May we desire for a biblical vision of love in our marriages that have such a firm foundation, looking to Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and able to say through all life's storms, "till death do us part."

Fourth, **Love can't be afforded.**

Song of Songs 8:7b, "If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised."

To quote the Beatles, "Can't buy me love." Not for the whole world.

There are two ways you can interpret this verse. You could read it in a way that focuses on the same of the man who sold it, or focuses on the same of the one who bought it. But I think God means for it to be both! It is both a "seller beware" and a "buyer beware" passage!

Some of us, might feel like we are sellers of love. We are done with it. We've been hurt too many times by family, by friends, or even by our spouse. So we will sell it to whomever or whatever, allows us the ability to build the highest and most impenetrable walls of safety. We want to get rid of vulnerability in

total. We bury ourselves in our career, we pursue endless and unsettled adventure, or perhaps we even barter with cheap and frequent sex in hopes that we never accidentally find ourselves in that tricky and icky love that seems to follow.

Others of us, are so desperate for love that we will buy and sell anything for it! We will sacrifice our time, our bodies, our community and our walk with Jesus if only someone will say, "I love you." And we pursue it endlessly not realizing that it is a bucket with a hole in the bottom. Whatever we pour in is never enough.

Here's the warning of this passage: To those who are about to give up love and try to find joy in everything else: don't give up. And, to those who are ready to give up everything in order to find love: don't give it up.

Why? Love is hard! All we've managed to see so far what we've seen is that love requires constant attention, it's pain is inevitable, it's hard to find, costly to maintain, and easy to damage.

While the story of humanity is one of giving up too soon, the story of the gospel is God getting us all the way there. The gospel is for those who fall short. For, as Paul says, "All have sinned and fall short..." of what? Of love? Of romance? Of intimacy? To a degree, certainly so—our experience confirms this!

But the shortness we feel in human love is not remedied by mere human love. Instead, Paul gives the solution in **Romans 3:23**, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

We look for love, we look for intimacy, we look for relationships, riches, and relaxation because we have fallen short of glory—God's glory. The gospel finally comes into our infinite problem and brings us to the one source which saves and satisfies. How do we get back? The very next verse tells us: **Romans 3:24**, [that we] "are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

We try so hard to find the love that saves us, the love that satisfies us, and the love that frees us but we will always fall short. But the solution is to accept then, the free offer of God's love, the love that gets us back to glory.

This is the final point this morning: **Love Freely Obtained**.

We are saved by the gospel, justified by the gospel. But the gospel rooted in love—God's love. We desire love to save us because it is love—God's love which does save us! **Ephesians 2:4-5**, "But God being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved."

The gospel is love satisfied.

This is why our lady's song on human love finds its end in the God of love: **Song 8:6**, "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord."

Why is love so powerful, perplexing and consuming? Because it is a flash, a flicker, a trapping of who God himself is like. The personal name for God, "Yahweh," doesn't show up at all in this book. But here,

the author here uses a word that is used nowhere else in all scripture--almost as if he made it up: "shalhevet-yah" the "flame of yah."

While it's lost on us in our culture, the words used for waters, death and flames were names of false gods during that time. But not only does love triumph over them—but more importantly God, the God of the Bible, triumphs over all rivals. Love wins, because God wins. And God, is love.

Now, we need to be careful here because our world will often affirm that "love is God." But that's not what this text is saying, nor is that what the Bible is saying. Love is not a thing. Love doesn't exist on some love farm in the spiritual heavens. What the Bible says, and what the Song here emphasizes is that God is love.

Human love exists because God in Triune love exists. This, and this alone, is the lens through which we should understand the love we enjoy as humans. The best, the deepest, the most scintillating acts of love are meant to point us to the source of the flame--God himself.

One author says it this way, "If human love is the very flame of Yahweh, then this human love at its best...points beyond itself to the Lord of love. The human 'spark off the Eternal Flame' reveals the character of that divine flame."

Notice the way in which only God makes impossible love possible—God alone doesn't give up in a world of quitters.

God did not leave love untended. The story of love lost is the story of us losing God. There was nothing we could do to get back into that garden. But God planned to bring us back, because of his love, through his son. He heard our cry and he sent his own son. And notice how Jesus, the husband of the church, prays to God the Father in **John 17:24-26**, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundations of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

How do you know God won't leave you alone? How do you know God will seal you on his heart? Because he sent Jesus.

And for any who come to him in faith—the effect of that love is unavoidable. He will love us. Jesus says that all that the Father gives him will come to him. Moreover he will seal us with the Holy Spirit. Just as intimacy seals the marriage—so the Holy Spirit seals the Christian.

The pinnacle of human union is meant to point us to this divine union. John Piper says it this way, **"God made us powerfully sexual so that he would be more deeply knowable. We were given the power to know each other sexually so that we might have some hint of what it will be like to know Christ supremely."**

As sure as sex is good, knowing Jesus is gooder. And guess what—this love cannot be ended. Why? Because this love already beat the grave. Human love is the story of "till death do us part," but divine love is the story of "death as the start." I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.

My wife and I will not be married forever, but because our resurrected Jesus is our resurrected hope we can sing at the altar, **(1 Corinthians 15:54-55)** “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

We all know that things that are most enjoyable, are most prized. Things which are most durable, are most expensive. And this love, the greatest joy possible, safely kept for all eternity—is the most unaffordable love.

We cannot afford it, we cannot purchase it, we cannot love enough to earn it, and we can’t sell the world for it. But Jesus, our infinite husband, purchased us with his infinite blood. For as Peter says, **1 Peter 1:18-21**, “Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”

Dear church, dear lovers, dear spouses, dear singles, dear widows, widowers, divorcees, children and college students—is that hope your hope? Is that glory, your love? You’ve spent your resources chasing the love of this world—have you been humble enough to turn back instead?

There is something in love more pleasing, more lovely and more beautiful than sex. And there is something in Christ more pleasing, more lovely, and more beautiful than a savior. What is that something? A husband. One who saves you—because he loves you. How can you find him more lovely than in the gospel?

Well, I invite you to come and find out. Come and take his hand by faith, come and commune with him in his word, by his Spirit as his church—come and see him stronger than death, fiercer than the grave, his flame—the very flame of God.