



## Rules vs. Love

### What Romantic Hearts Prefer

by Chris Tiegreen

There once was a couple who loved each other very, very much.

They loved each other so much, in fact, that every act of kindness, every gesture of service, was considered pure privilege. Whichever one of them woke up first would cook breakfast for the one who slept longer; they would surprise each other with gifts, small tokens of affection that were monetarily valueless but sentimentally priceless because they were laden with meaning; and they would tell each other constantly how much they loved each other, mainly because they just couldn't keep it in.

Over time, however, the relationship became a series of behaviors. They would still cook breakfast for each other, but only because breakfast was now the responsibility of whomever woke up first. They would still surprise each other with gifts, but only because the absence of gifts would have broken a long-standing tradition. And they still told each other how much they loved each other, but only because they had trained themselves in the vocabulary of love. The actions were the same; the motivation had subtly, drastically changed.

During those first years of their relationship, the couple overflowed with life. The latter years, however, were a slow, daily death. A kind of love was still there, but all the affection was gone. As soon as their acts of love became a to-do list rather than an overflow of desire, the shell of the relationship hardened and the inner joy gradually, aching, seeped away.

### How Love Fades

Love turns to ritual quickly. The spontaneity and affection that fill a relationship with life can become rote behaviors almost overnight. Whenever we want to recapture those early exhilarating feelings, we do the things that accompanied them, assuming that the actions will spark the emotions again. But they don't. In all matters of love, actions are only a product, never a producer, of how we really feel.

This dynamic is apparent all too often, widely observable in cinema, literature and, sadly, in the firsthand experience of many. Every married couple, presumably, has at least occasionally wavered between form and feeling, trying to manufacture the former in hopes of cultivating the latter. But manufacturing form usually doesn't work. Love has to be felt.

That's the way it is in our relationship with God too. I know that doesn't jibe with most definitions of "agape," that ideal form of biblical love allegedly based entirely on fact and never on emotion. But try bringing that kind of love into any relationship that matters. Would your children be glad to know you're fulfilling your parental duties in spite of your lack of feelings for them? How about your husband or wife being content with your explanation that though the feelings have gone, the commitment to honor the piece of paper that says you're married remains? No, I didn't think so.

The fact is that the Christian life can degenerate into a set of rules suddenly and imperceptibly. There's nothing wrong with rules; they're great when the heart just isn't in it anymore and you need a temporary framework. But they're always remedial. As a long-term norm and the basis of a relationship, they drain us of life. The answer is to have the heart fixed.

That's what the Christian life is all about. It's a heart issue. The Holy Spirit didn't come into us to teach us which rules to obey—"the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). He inhabits us for an entirely different reason: unbridled, passionate love. The kind that serves because serving is a privilege, that fulfills rules even when unaware that there were rules to fulfill. The kind that gets up and cooks breakfast for the beloved. The kind that gives gifts because giving is what naturally happens. The kind that declares and demonstrates "I love you" constantly because the love just can't be contained.

Does that accurately describe your Christian life? Yeah, mine either. Oh, sometimes that kind of love is there, and it's incredible when it is. But as a pattern, we substitute obedience to form over a natural response to passion. And it's a slow, aching death. If we're not exuberantly in love with God, we're missing the essence of the Christian life.

When that's the case, what's the solution? Pardon my lack of conventionality, but the answer isn't a recommitment. Neither is it a deeper resolve or an increase in the spiritual disciplines. Not to criticize, but I've found that those things only accelerate the death of desire in a relationship. They don't make the heart beat faster. They do nothing to rekindle love.

### **How Love Returns**

No, rekindling love is all about spontaneity, adventure, passion, and pleasure. It certainly doesn't violate the character of the other person—God forbid, as in this case the other person is actually God—but it does recognize the true nature of the new heart. Rekindling love begins by understanding that God is a romantic in love with His bride.

Some generations would blush at such a notion—or worse yet, condemn it—but God makes it very, very clear in His Word. He portrays Himself as a lover in the Song of Songs and a jealous husband in the Law, the prophets, and the parables of Jesus. Are we, like most insensitive spouses, completely unable to take a hint?

If your faith is in need of revitalization, imagine what advice you'd give to the couple in the first four paragraphs. How should they get the sparks flying again? Would you tell them to focus more on the fact that they were married? Or would you encourage them to go away together, to spend some time rekindling the flame that was once there? Whichever advice you would give them, turn around and give it to yourself.

God's heart of love is not a sterile heart. He approaches you with enthusiasm and desire. If you return His passion with formulaic living, the Romantic is sadly, seriously disappointed. If you return His passion with passion, the Romantic is thrillingly, gloriously . . . well, wildly in love with His beloved. A relationship defined by such love is never defined by the rules within it. And it is never, ever unsatisfying.