



Love – a Feeling and/or Attitude?

We were having evening devotions and read from the children's Story Bible how Abraham sent his servant, Eliezer, to Haran to find a wife for Isaac. The author explained that in those days, it was customary for parents to choose their children's marriage partner. As though still reading from the Story Bible, I pretended to read, *"as parents should still do today."*

It took a second for the words to sink in, and then the children began to smile. *"It didn't really say that, Dad. You made it up."* But would it be such a bad thing, though? *"Of course it would!"* say the teenagers. *"You cannot marry someone that you don't love!"* But who's to say that you can't love that person? They can hardly believe their ears, and respond with some emphasis: *"You make it sound as though you think that you can **make** yourself love someone!"* Yes, that's what I think. This will only make sense, however, if we regard love as an attitude in the first place, and not just a feeling.

Love is not just a feeling that lies outside of our control; a feeling that lives in us or doesn't. No, we choose¹ whether we will love or hate someone.

I define love as a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the benefit of an other. We base this on the love of Jesus for us. *"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends"* (John 15:13). This love was an attitude that God showed to us, even though we possessed no qualities, virtues, or goodness that would have aroused His feelings of love. Pity, perhaps, but not love. God **chose** to love us. This love was entirely in His control. He chose whom He would love and whom He would hate (cf. Romans 9:13).

The very fact that God commands us to love our spouse implies that love is not outside of our control. We choose to love someone, or we choose to hate him. This is important. A couple once came to my study. I asked them what the problem was, and they responded, *"We have a major problem in our marriage. We don't love each other any more. We don't see any future for our marriage."* I said to them, *"You don't have a marriage problem; you have a spiritual problem. Your problem is that you have chosen to live in disobedience to the command of God. Scripture commands husbands to love their wives, and wives to love their husbands. When you say to me, 'We **don't** love each other,' you are really saying 'We **won't** love each other.' You choose whether you will love or not."*

Now I can imagine that someone will say, *"What about our feelings for each other? How can you love someone if you don't have feelings for him/her?"* But think about what the Lord commands us in Matthew 5:44:

*"But I say to you, **love** your **enemies**, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."*

(Matthew 5:44)

Even though we might not like a person, we can still choose to love him. God commands that we do so. Though we might not like his personality or his character, we can choose to do our utmost to seek his well-being, even at our own expense. That is also both possible and necessary within marriage.

What about the feelings? Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that feelings are unimportant or not necessary, especially in marriage. But first and foremost is the attitude. I dare say that where this attitude prevails, the feelings will grow. And conversely, where this attitude is lacking, feelings will die. Remember what love is. It is a willingness to devote oneself completely to

the happiness and well-being of the other. If husband and wife choose to devote themselves to do what benefits and pleases the other, feelings of affection will grow. And conversely, if husband and wife choose to devote themselves to do what benefits and pleases themselves, then feelings of affection will die.

I am sure that it was this proper attitude that made it possible for parentally arranged marriages to work in times past. In Genesis 24:67 we read:

*"Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, **and he loved her.**"*

Someone might say, *"Well, Isaac was lucky. He was given a woman he could love. But just imagine if he had been given a wife whom he didn't love!"* But I wonder whether Isaac's "love" wasn't more of an attitude than just a feeling. You might read this text as if it was 'love at first sight,' and ascribe it to love at first sight. But we could also read it in this way: When Isaac took Rebekah as his wife, he **chose** to love her. From the moment that he took her as his wife, he vowed to devote his life to her well-being and happiness. You can be sure that if Isaac and Rebekah had this attitude, feelings of affection for each other would soon grow.

Such a caring and self-sacrificing attitude is the fertile soil in which feelings of affection will grow in marriage.

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¹ The natural man is incapable of showing true love. Only those can love who have themselves been loved by God, and who are being recreated in His image.