

The Crossings, Matt Powell
Engage Your Marriage (Week 3)

Have you ever tried something new—a concept, an idea, a sport—but you had no idea what you were doing? I am a horrible golfer, but I will pay a crazy amount of money to play with someone who has never played before, to get them out there swinging, loving it and laughing. People laugh at me, so I like to watch someone golf for the first time, the way they take four to six swings at the ball before ever making contact.

Shortly after Lori and I got married in college, we decided to try playing racquetball. Neither one of us had any idea, whatsoever, how to play the game, but we had a vague idea in our heads from watching. Obviously you use a racket to smack a ball against a wall, and when the ball bounces back you smack it again. How hard can that be? So we went to a recreation center, and I will give you the punch line: this could have ended much worse than it actually did. We could have been damaged for life and plastic surgery could have been necessary after this outing, but thankfully it was not. Well, we started off excited and full of energy; we began smacking this ball and running around in this little box, and it wasn't more than 20 to 30 minutes before we said, "We have no idea what we are doing and this is no fun."

I think the majority of the time people walk into marriage with the same mindset. They walk in with their rackets, they know they need to smack the ball, and they have a general idea of how to swing, but they don't have a clue what it really means to participate in love.

One of the most memorable things I did at a previous church was to teach at premarital workshops. A large group of people preparing to get married would attend, and we would speak to them about different topics. Then the couples would go to isolated rooms and talk through discussion questions. As a pastor, I would go around to these rooms to check on them, sometimes entering unannounced and sometimes targeting rooms with a "green sign" on the door that meant they needed to talk. And when I walked into these rooms, the very first question I would ask is, "Tell me what your relationship with Jesus looks like."

I cannot tell you how many people this caught off guard. They would think . . . *Wait a minute. I am here to talk about marriage. Why are you bringing that question into this equation?* But when we began talking I would realize that they had walked into this idea, this conception of marriage that they had either seen growing up or observed in others, but they had never truly understood the Creator's design of love. They did not really know how to play the game. They just walked in and started swinging. I believe this is why we see marriages begin to crumble within two to nine years—nine seems to be the magic number.

In this journey through Song of Songs we will look at four themes that describe biblical love: it is specific, it is spoken, it is steadfast and it is sexual. Today we are going to focus on the spoken part, but first we are going to take a step back and get a *Google Earth* approach. *Google Earth*, if you are not familiar with it, is a software program that allows you to look at the whole earth, and you can type in any specific location and it will zoom way in, right down to your own house.

That is what we are doing today. Before we can understand the specifics of how love is communicated between a husband and wife, we have to step back and see the big picture of love. What is love about? Where did it come from? What is the big design? If we don't get that first then we are doing nothing more than walking into a box and swinging our weapons. So if we are going to understand love, then we have to understand the prequel. And if we are going to understand love, then we must first choose the right teacher.

In 1 John, chapter four, verse seven it says: "[Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation—](#)" big word, think substitution—"for our sins. [Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.](#)"

[In order to understand this big "L" word—LOVE—that runs rampant throughout our culture, you must first choose the right teacher.](#) And there are two options—that's it. Your teacher either can

be the Creator, or it can be the created. You can decide to define love by looking at the One who created this whole thing, the One who is defined by love, or you can decide to define love by looking at everything around you—the created media. Whichever one you choose to look at will define what love means for you.

Let me just throw out some thoughts. When you look at the created you see a love that is temporary, mere emotion, about pleasure, selfish, about *me*. But when you look at the Creator, you see a love that is never-ending, active, practiced, spoken, participatory, spiritual and selfless. So you must choose the right teacher if you are going to understand what love really is.

We see this in the first verses of the passage I just read: "[Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.](#)" The love that lets us love one another is from God. Why in the world would we ever look anywhere else to define love but to God? God is love. That is the only place throughout scripture, as far as I know, that presents this sentence structure—God is love. "[Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.](#)"

I know what you are thinking: God is love, but I don't really understand God too well, so that doesn't help me understand what love is. Yet, when we go a step further, we see that not only is God love but He has shown us what love is by giving us a picture of that love. "[In this the love of God was made manifest among us.](#)"

God does not expect us to figure all this out on our own. [Here is the ultimate picture of what love is: we have to choose the right teacher, but we also have to comprehend the reality of the cross.](#) To understand and rightly implement love, whether between a husband and a wife, a father and a son, we must comprehend the reality of the cross. Jesus took on the punishment that we deserved. Substitute for us. That's love. If we are going to understand love we have to rightly understand and comprehend the reality of the cross. That love is selfless.

Notice these words which have occurred throughout our series. Love is selfless, not selfish as the world and the created world define it. Love is not a temporary emotion; there is nothing

temporary about the Almighty God giving His only Son to die a death so that we might live through Him. Yet the created wants to define love by a mere temporary emotion. *How do I feel right now and how am I going to satisfy my selfish desire?*

John 4:9-10 says: "God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this love, not that we have loved God but that He had loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." So there is one more step: we have to take this a little bit further in order to rightly understand the big picture, this *Google Earth* look at love. **We have to choose the right teacher, we have to comprehend the reality of the cross, and third, we have to cultivate a relationship with Jesus.** Notice in this text what it says: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him."

Notice that picture of living through Him. That doesn't mean God is a product on a shelf that we reach to when we need something. God is not merely a comfort-in-crisis pill box. We don't look in our medicine cabinet and say, "Oh, there it is—God's comfort-in-crisis" and take the pill and move on with our lives; or "God's financial provision in difficulty" or "God's calm in the storm." He is not some medicine cabinet pill bottle that we look to; rather we need to cultivate a relationship that is non-stop and never-ending.

The word used in John, chapter 15, is "abiding." Before we can start to apply love to a spouse, we must understand what love, itself, is. John 15:9: "As the Father has loved me . . .," this is red letter in most of your Bibles because this is Jesus Himself speaking. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." Abide in my love. That word means "stay" or "remain." This is not a pill bottle on the shelf that we reach to in crisis; this is where we stay, where we remain, where we connect to and abide in, where we participate in a relationship that is never-ending, not segmented, holistic, affecting every area of our lives and every day of our week. Cultivate a relationship with Him because when we begin to lose that relationship, then we begin to lose the very source of love itself.

Every time I have talked to a married couple going through crisis—not a life crisis like death in the family, but a marital crisis—one of the two of them, if not both, have lost this sense of abiding. They have somehow stepped out of remaining in who Jesus is and cultivating a relationship with Him. They have become consumed by . . . you fill in the blank, and it is selfish, temporary, and no longer abiding in and resting in the very display of the definition of love, itself, made manifest in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Do you see the equation forming here? We want a marriage that is saturated by this all-encompassing love, don't we? Isn't that what it is all about? But we are not even connected to the source of that love. We have lost sight of the definition of love because we are worried and distracted by all this stuff. Yet, the pipeline of love displayed and made manifest in the cross has lost its place in our lives.

It says in verse nine: "[As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you](#)" When we are abiding in Christ and experiencing love from the source, His joy will be in us.

Joy is the last word a lot of married couples would use to describe their relationship. There is a difference between surviving and thriving. Is our goal to survive marriage? *I have just got to make it through another day.* Or is our goal to thrive in marriage—to experience the ultimate joy of being inside, abiding in Christ, tapped into the love source Himself and experiencing that in our homes and our marriages—the covenant God created?

Cultivate a relationship with Him. How do you do that? How do you abide in Christ? I want to give you some practical steps. Number one—engage in the truth of His word. It is that simple. Guys, if you have never done this before, I challenge you to open up to Psalms, chapter one, and begin reading. Read for five to ten minutes and just begin to engage in truth.

Second, how do you abide in Christ experiencing that love? Engage in prayer. Guys, if that makes you uncomfortable, then get alone in a room and begin talking to Him. Thank Him. Oftentimes that is how I begin my prayers: "Thank you for the house that You have blessed." "Thank you for the bride You blessed me with." "Thank you for the children You have given me." "Thank you for the parents You have given me." "Thank you for the job." Just begin thanking Him. Open that conversation.

Engage in prayer and engage in community. How do I abide in the love of Jesus? By doing it around other people. I know some of you think you are spiritual superheroes and can do it alone, but that is not the case. You must participate in the love of abiding in Jesus around others. Be there. When you are up here they are up here with you, but when you down here they can be down here with you as well.

How do we abide in Christ? Engage in truth; engage in prayer; engage in community; and last, engage in mission. *Are you telling me I have got to move to Afghanistan? Sell everything I have?* Absolutely not. This just means that your inflow translates to outflow. Engaging in mission means where there is inflow—engaging in truth, prayer, community—there is outflow, and outflow can take all kinds of shapes: It may mean you are dropping off a bag for a homeless person under the bridge. It may mean you are inviting a friend to participate in abiding in Christ at The Crossings. It may mean you are going overseas to serve God's kingdom. It may mean all of those things, but inflow translates to outflow.

How do I abide in Christ? Engage in truth, engage in prayer, engage in community and engage in mission. In every wedding that I do, I refer to this theme and read Philippians, chapter three, where Paul talks about all the things he accomplished. It is his resume if you will. He talks about how he had it all. And I will say to a married couple, "Look at you, guy, you got the girl. Look at you, bride, you got the guy. You've got it all." But at the end of that passage in Philippians, chapter three, Paul says: "I count it all as rubbish." That is one of my favorite Greek words in the New Testament . . . *skubala*. It means poop. I count it all rubbish—animal excrement—compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. I say that at every wedding because if

you don't get there, if you are not abiding in Christ and if you are not falling in love with Jesus every day, then you will not have the ability to fall in love with that person at your side.

Do you see the *Google Earth* approach? If you are pursuing things in life like the great career—*I am climbing this ladder and I am going to be the xyz of xyz company corporation*—if you are putting those things above wanting to fall in love with Jesus every day, then you are setting yourself up for failure because your definition of love no longer becomes the Creator Himself. We have to cultivate a relationship with Him if we are going to understand love. Even if we are to understand love between a parent and a child we have to figure out these things, but they are even more magnified within the covenant of marriage.

So we must choose the right teacher. We must comprehend the reality of the cross—what was given—the true display of love in the sacrificial death of Jesus and cultivate a relationship with Him as it says in John 15:4: "[Abide in My love.](#)" **And last, if we are to understand love we must converge all of these things on those around us.** In John, chapter 15, we see what many of you know as the greatest commandment. Notice the order; it is very important. Verse 12 says: "[This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.](#)" He doesn't even tell the greatest commandment until He first says in verse four: "[Abide in My love.](#)"

It is no different in our marriages. We cannot give real love to one another until we first abide in His love and who He is. Guys, if we are to understand what love means, we must cultivate this relationship with Him, and then, in that order, begin to converge all of that affection on others.

Do you understand what I mean by the word prequel? I know many of us are of the *Star Wars* generation, and I have told you that I am into action movies. But I also love musicals. I have a music background and I love music, so I love musicals. They are fascinating to me, not only the music but the plots as well. One of the most classic movies ever made is *The Wizard of Oz*. The sequel to *The Wizard of Oz* is called *Wicked*. I saw it three times: twice on Broadway in New York and once here in Houston, and I loved it because the music was masterful and the plot was amazing. Here is why. When you begin to get into *Wicked*, which is about what happened before *The Wizard of Oz*, it completely changes the way you view *The Wizard of Oz*. This is amazing because the *The Wizard of Oz* is so culturally seared into our conscious that we can

converse about it quite comfortably. Just think how amazing a plot would have to be in order to change how you look at such an iconic movie.

Wicked did that for me. The way I viewed the characters, the way I interacted as a participant in the plot, was different. All the questions you have in *The Wizard of Oz* are answered in the prequel *Wicked*. I think it is one of the best prequels I have ever seen because it completely changes the way you view *The Wizard of Oz*.

Now, if you still respect me, I would argue that this prequel is similar to taking steps toward understanding what biblical marriage looks like. Before we can ever worry about spending time, loving intentionally, and overcoming obstacles at play, we have to understand the Creator Himself and love Him as the ultimate love source. The cross is the manifested example of love, and we cannot give love to this person we are doing life alongside unless we are abiding, staying, and remaining in Him.

Abiding completely changes the way we understand love within the walls of marriage. When we look at the cross, at the selflessness, at the sacrificial love of the cross, if we begin abiding and cultivating a relationship with Jesus Himself it will radically change our homes. Do you want to take your marriage from a place of survival to a place of abundant joy where you want to do nothing else but come home to that other person, that spouse you do life with? Do you want to thrive? Abide in Jesus Christ. Abide in Him, let Him begin to transform you, and let Him define what love is for you. That will transform your home, your marriage, and the relationships you are engaged in.

Every week I have given you a goal, and this week I am going to read one verse to you before doing that. This is Song of Songs, chapter one, verse five. The Shulamite woman says, "[I am very dark . . .](#)" Remember that pale skin was considered beautiful in that culture. "[I am very dark, but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar.](#)" These tents were made out of black goats, so if you looked out over the plains you would see these black spots. "[O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.](#)" Again, she is pounding this home . . . *I don't look like the way the culture defines beautiful.* "[Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me.](#)" Essentially she is saying, "Don't

look at me." "My mother's sons were angry with me and they made me keeper of the vineyards." By the way this reads I don't think this was her true brother; it might have been a stepbrother or a half brother. And when she says her skin is dark, she is ashamed: "I have had to work hard and I have not been able to take care of myself and make myself."

Notice that even though she has a great man who communicates love and pursues her, she still has self-doubt. She is saying, "I need to be loved. I need to hear. I need you to speak to me. I need you to tell me that you love me. I need this kind of love from you." This is a self-esteem moment.

Now I would argue to you that this is not true just for females. I know your husbands may act tough, but they still desperately need affirmation as well. If you are going to attempt to communicate, you can never meet another's need until you are abiding in Jesus, until you are cultivating a relationship with Him and experiencing the love He wants to pour over you. Next week we will talk more about how a husband and wife are to speak and communicate biblically.

Here are my challenges for this week: Have a spiritual conversation with your spouse this week. We are going to give you the resources to do that. You can take our 242 resource and begin looking at it, praying through it, and using it as your own personal devotion for abiding in Jesus. And this will give you a springboard to a spiritual conversation with your spouse.