

THE ART OF ROMANCE

John Tucker, Mt Albert Baptist Church, 28 October 2007

A while back I came across some statements by young children. These are pearls of wisdom from kids in regards to love and marriage:

What do most people do on a date?

Dates are for having fun, and people should use them to get to know each other. Even boys have something to say if you listen long enough. Lynnette, age 8

What would you do on a first date that was turning sour?

I'd run home and play dead. The next day I would call all the newspapers and make sure they wrote about me in all the dead columns. Craig, age 9

How do you make a person fall in love with you?

Don't do anything like have smelly, green sneakers. You might get attention, but attention ain't the same thing as love. Alonzo, age 9.

How can a stranger tell if two people are married?

You might have to guess, based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids. Derrick, age 8

Is it better to be single or married?

It's better for girls to be single but not for boys. Boys need someone to clean up after them. Anita, age 9

It gives me a headache to think about that stuff. I'm just a kid. I don't need that kind of trouble. Kenny, age 7.

Out of the mouths of babes. When Jonathan asked me to speak on the art of romance I thought of a website called postsecret.com, where people can anonymously mail their own personal secrets in the form of homemade postcards. It's an enormously popular site. Here are some examples: [Slides 1,2,3,4,5 – click through them as I speak to them]

I doubt if there's any area where our society needs wisdom more than when it comes to romance and sexuality. As it happens, the writer of the book of Proverbs has a lot to say about the topic. If he were wanting to teach us today – or help us to teach others – the art of romance what messages or "postcards" do you think he would send us?

1. Enjoy the gift of romance

[Slide 6] Well, I think the first postcard that he might send us would be marked with these words from Proverbs 30:18-19:

There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four things that I do not understand:

[Any time you see this kind of expression – three and then four – the writer is pointing to the fourth thing on the list]
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a young woman.

In other words, romantic love and sexual intimacy are a wonderful mystery, an "amazing" aspect of God's creation. A gift to be enjoyed. This is important. The church hasn't always taught this well. Between the third and tenth centuries, the church issued edicts forbidding husbands and wives from having sex on Thursdays, because that was the day of Christ's arrest; and then on Fridays, because that was the day of his death; and then on Sundays in honour of the saints. And then the church said, because there was a kind of suspicion about sexuality, no sexual relations between husbands and wives during the forty fast day period before Easter, and then during the forty days of Advent, and then during the forty days of Pentecost. They added so many fast days and holidays to the list that Philip Yancey says it reached the point where, if you followed the church's rules, only 44 days a year were available for marital sex. Some of you hear that and think, "That sounds like a nightmare." Some of you hear that and think, "Where can I get one of those calendars?" But the writer of Proverbs is saying that God gave us the gift of sexual intimacy to be enjoyed. That's the first postcard, the first message: enjoy the gift of romance. It's a good and powerful gift.

2. Avoid the pain of adultery

But precisely because romance or sexuality is such a powerful gift, the writer of Proverbs also says that when it gets mishandled, it can be so destructive. In particular he devotes proverbs after proverb to warning us about the dangers of adultery. [Slide 7] Look at the picture he paints in Proverbs 7, the picture of a man walked down the road towards a house where a married woman lives. It's twilight. Night is falling. She comes out to meet him, kisses him, and seduces him with these words (7:16-23):

"I have covered my bed with coloured linens from Egypt.
I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.
Come, let's drink deep of love till morning;
let's enjoy ourselves with love!
My husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey..."

[Slide 8] With persuasive words like these, she led him astray.
All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter,

like a deer stepping into a noose till an arrow pierces his liver,
like a bird darting into a snare,
little knowing it will cost him his life.

The writer of Proverbs is saying that an intimate relationship with someone outside the security of a lifelong marriage commitment might promise great pleasure, might appear extremely alluring, but if you walk down that road, there will be wounds, and pain and regret. There will be damaged families, and hurt children, and shattered friendships. It's just not worth it. As a pastor I've looked eyes with people as they have told me how they've gone down this road. And it's cost them their life. If you're in pain of some kind today, maybe it's the pain of an empty marriage, or the pain of feeling lonely and unloved, having an affair is not the answer to your pain. It'll just bring more pain. Did you see the article in the *Herald* (Oct 11, 2007) a couple of weeks back? A survey of 2,000 working women in Britain reveals that 80 per cent of them say they have been attracted to someone they've worked with; 70 per cent think that flirting makes the workplace more interesting; and almost sixty per cent – six out of ten British women – have had a secret affair with a work colleague. In our culture today, the power of sexual temptation is very real. None of us is immune. That's why the writer of Proverbs goes on to say this (7:24-27): [Slide 9]

Now then, my sons, listen to me; pay attention to what I say.
[These Proverbs were originally written to train young men for service in the royal court. They apply equally to women.]
Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths.
Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng.
Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death.

So the second message or postcard from Proverbs would be this: avoid the pain of adultery. If you're on a road heading in that direction, if you're drawn to certain images on television, if you're visiting certain places on the internet, if you're flirting with a colleague, if you're inappropriately intimate with a girlfriend or boyfriend, if you're in a relationship that is sexually dishonoring to God, do what you can to get out of there. Ask for help if necessary. Because it's just pain down that road.

3. Cultivate the joy of marriage

But sometimes the best defense is a strong offense. [Slide 10] Proverbs 5:18-19 says:

May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer —
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated by her love.

The writer is saying that if you're married the best way to avoid being unfaithful is to cultivate your marriage relationship. Rejoice in the wife of your youth. There's an old story that John Ortberg tells about an elderly couple who are lying in bed. And the wife is a little discontented in her spirit. She says to her husband, "You know when we first got married, when we were young, you used to snuggle up next to me in bed." And he kind of grumbles a little bit, but he rolls over and snuggles up next to her. And then she says, "You know, when we were young and we were first married, you used to hold my hand in bed." And he mutters a bit but reaches over with his arm and grabs her hand. And she says, "You know when we were young, when we were in bed, you used to nibble on my ear." And he throws the covers off and jumps out of bed. And she's kind of hurt, and says, "Where are you going?" And he says, "To get my teeth!" Rejoice in the wife of your youth. Have fun together. Keep enjoying each other. And if it means you've got to go get your teeth, then go get your teeth. If that means forgiving each other, then forgive.

4. Choose the right partner

But often the key to finishing well is to start well – in this case to choose the right marriage partner. [Slide 11] The writer of Proverbs has a lot to say about choosing the right partner. In chapter 21 for example, he says:

- 21:9 Better to live on a corner of the roof
than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.
- 21:19 Better to live in a desert
than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife.

The roof of an ancient Israelite home was flat and you could sleep there on a hot summer's night, but you wouldn't want to live on the roof. It can get cold and wet. Just as you wouldn't want to live in a desert, where it's hot and sandy. But either would be better, the writer says, than finding yourself in a binding lifelong relationship with the wrong person. So if you're single and you'd like to get married, the writer of Proverbs has a word for you: choose your marriage partner wisely. It's so important. That's why Bill Hybels says that after a lifetime of carefully studying the book of Proverbs he thinks its wisdom in regards to choosing a life partner can be summarised in four words: Don't mess it up. Avoid a decision that you might regret for the rest of your life. Here are three quick suggestions.

(a) Grow up first

[Slide 12] Don't get married too young. Statistics show that divorce rates are lowest for men and women who wait to marry until they are twenty-

eight years of age or older. The highest divorce rates are among those who marry during their early twenties or younger. Why is that? Most people younger than twenty-five are still working out who they are, still busy working out what they want in life, what their core values are going to be. So choosing the right person at this point in life can be a bit of a gamble. I've seen good friends deeply hurt because at least one of them, when they got married, hadn't really grown up.

(b) Take your time

[Slide 13] Secondly, take your time. A few years back Kansas State University did a study that shows there is a strong correlation between long courtships and satisfying marriages, and an equally strong correlation between short courtships and heartbreaking marriages. In other words, take your time. Get to know the other person really, really well. I bought a car on Trade Me a few months back. I'm not the most mechanical guy in the world. I drove the car around the block. It felt okay. But I had no idea, really, what the motor was like – whether the cam belt was worn or the transmission was dodgy. So I got the AA to come around and subject the car to a battery of tests. It took ages – much to the vendor's frustration. And it cost heaps, much to my frustration. But it threw up some interesting information about the car, defects that the vendor had never told me about. It was worth it. And when it comes to choosing a marriage partner, it's worth spending the time to find out what's really under the bonnet, so to speak. Do they communicate effectively? What are their expectations of marriage? How have they been dinged or scratched by life?

(c) Look for character

[Slide 14] But the writer of Proverbs says that the most important thing to look for is character: "A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones" (Prov 12:4). It's character that determines the level of trust and intimacy and genuine romance in a relationship. That's why Proverbs 31:30 says: "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." Nothing impacts a person's character and personality and relationships more than a commitment to God. And few things impact unbelievers quite like the witness of a loving, trusting, exuberant Christian marriage. I was reading this week about Robert McQuilken. He was the president of Columbia Bible College. But his wife, Muriel, developed Alzheimer's disease. She became more and more confused and dependent on him. Eventually, McQuilken decided that he could not both remain principal of a college and care for his wife at the same time. So at the height of his

career he resigned his position. People were amazed. But this is what he said. Look at this clip... **[Show 2 minute video clip from YouTube]**

For some of us the challenge is to watch the wife of our youth or the husband of our youth grow weak with age and die. For others of us the challenge, when it comes to this area of love and romance, is to cultivate or resurrect a marriage that is dying. For some of us the challenge will involve temptation: maybe it's the temptation to watch stuff on TV or the internet that is moving you down a road that will bring pain; or the temptation to pursue a relationship or a level of physical intimacy with someone that will bring pain. Maybe you've already made decisions that you regret. Maybe you're single and feeling lonely, and the challenge is to find the right man or the right woman. When it comes to the art of romance and the area of relationships and sexuality, we all struggle in some way. We're all marred by the fall. The good news is that God's grace is sufficient for us all. People with all kinds of relationship failures and sexual histories came to Jesus, and he never got embarrassed, never turned anyone away, never gave up on anybody. And he won't start with you. So let's come to him in prayer and ask him for the grace that we need.