



Becoming the Perfect Mate - Pastor Mark Johnson

Last month's marriage retreat was a timely blessing. I was not only looking forward to a weekend with my best friend and being challenged by a provocative speaker but taking a needed break at the end of a hectic fall schedule. John Christie, the retreat speaker, began the weekend focusing on the primary reason why some relationships suffer and fail while others not only survive but *thrive*. As a reminder for those who attended and an encouragement for those who did not, I've included a summary of my notes from this message below:

We, men and women, are made in God's image and built (by design) for relationship. We are designed to perfectly relate both to God and to one another. If this is true, why then do we have such difficulty relating perfectly? Answer: we married someone who is slightly defective. And...our spouse married someone who is slightly defective. The origin of this defect? Sin. Because we are sinful, our ability to relate as God intends has been thwarted. Only through a restored relationship with God, forgiveness of sin and the subsequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit can we overcome the barrier of sin in relationships. In this redeemed state we have the power to choose the Word's way of relationship over the world's way. We can choose the wisdom of the Holy Spirit over the ways of Hollywood.

In Chip Ingram's book, "Love, Sex and Lasting Relationships," he contrasts these two perspectives as a method of finding the love of a lifetime in our marriage:

Hollywood's version of finding happiness and fulfillment in a relationship consists of the following steps:

(1) FIND the perfect mate

The right person is out there somewhere. Keep your eyes open because you never know what circumstances will cause your paths to cross. They are the one you have always dreamed of. The knight in shining armor. The damsel in distress. The one who will be your perfect match and that will complete you in every way. The one with whom you are destined to live happily ever after.

(2) FALL in love

You know this is the right person because when you are around them to go weak in the knees. You feel so good when you are around them. When you hold hands or kiss, fireworks go off. When you are not with them you long to be reunited. You are compatible in seemingly every way and you rarely argue. Little quirky things about them only endear you more strongly.

(3) FIX your hopes and dreams of fulfillment on that person

Because they are the one you've been looking/dreaming for, you feel complete when you are with them. They make you feel alive and fulfilled. Their constant attention makes you feel special and valued. All the wrongs in your life seem to vanish when you are together.

(4) When that FAILS (*because you obviously chose the wrong person*), repeat steps 1-3 with a different person

When all those good feelings begin to wane and the quirky things about your mate turn into irritations, it is becoming clear that they may not be the right person for you after all. You become disappointed in the fact that the love between you isn't as exciting as it once was. You find that you disagree on things more than ever and you begin to wonder what you ever saw in this person in the first place. You conclude that either you made a mistake -or- that the person somehow has changed. The solution: get out of the relationship and begin looking for the perfect match for you that must still be out there somewhere.

In life we see this process repeated over and over. Our culture celebrates this process and continually verifies that this is the tried and true way to find the perfect mate. Every Hollywood love story contains these essential elements of finding true love.

The Problem: because the first three steps are flawed and based upon fallacious thinking, the relationship is doomed to experience step 4: Failure. The false solution: find someone else.

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit has a better way. God's intent for relationships is not only to survive but to thrive. According to God and His Word, the plan for experiencing the best relationship that most closely reflects God's intent for us in marriage is to follow these steps:

(1) BECOME the perfect mate

Instead of focusing on the shortcomings of our (slightly defective) spouse, God commands that we focus on the perfecting work that He is doing in our own life through the developing of godly character. Ephesians 5:1 says, "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children." The Christian life is consumed with glorifying God by ever being conformed into the likeness of Christ. His desire is that His own character is developed in us through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Because we have been given the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13) and are participators in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), our goal is to continually reflect his nature in us in an ever increasing manner.

(2) LIVE in love

Instead of depending upon the transient nature of the "feelings" of love which wane, choose to live a life of unconditional love, seeking to nurture and defer to our spouse in

Christ-like love (1 John 3:11, 16, 18-20; 4:7-11).

"Falling" in love, as defined by Hollywood, is called infatuation. Infatuation corresponds with a real chemical response in our brain that produces all the feelings we associate with the initial stages of love: weak knees, fireworks, excitement, romance, all idle thoughts refocusing on the person with whom one is infatuated, etc. The problem with this type of love is that infatuation only lasts between 6 weeks and 18 months. For love to truly mature (become perfected) it must go beyond infatuation to selfless unconditional love that seeks the best in the other person rather than worshipping the feelings that we ourselves experience.

A primary effect of sin is to place "self" at the center of our existence. True love places others above self. True love defers and submits to the other. This type of love is what perfectly exists within the triune Godhead.

At Christ's birth, God deferred the worship of angels to his Son (Heb 1:6). At the transfiguration, God defers attention to Christ's teaching (Mark 9:7). Christ's life was fully devoted to deferring to God's will (John 5:19; Mt 26:39) and teaches believers to do the same (Mt 6:10). The Holy Spirit reveals the truth of God (John 16:13-15) and reminds believers of what Christ taught (John 14:26).

In the same way, we defer to one another in love. Christ laid down his

very life for us who believe. We are to express the same sacrificial love to one another (1 John 4:9-11).

(3) FIX your hope of fulfillment on God.

By design, God, not another person, is the only being equipped to make us whole. Problems arise when we make someone else responsible for our needs and to fulfill our greatest desires. When they fail...and they will... we then blame them for our disappointments. Only when we fix our hope of fulfillment on Christ who is the fullness of God can we experience the relationship with our spouse that God intended (Col 2:8-10).

(4) When this FAILS (and sometimes it does because we are defective people) repeat steps 1-3.

Through this process, sometimes the best advice is to just "hang in there" as God continues to refine us and shape us into his image. We made a covenant before God that, for better or for worse, we were committed to our mate. This covenant holds us together during difficult days when there is disappointment and pain. If we are faithful to God and our spouse, committing to becoming the perfect mate, living a life of love and fixing our hope of fulfillment on God alone, then our relationship with our spouse has the greatest potential to realize the full measure of what God has intended for us in relationship.