

Introduction:

Romans 8:28-30 says God causes all things to work together for good for those who love Him. This did not mean everything that happens will appear to be good, but rather, when we love God, He guides everything that happens to us, around us and with us to an ultimate conclusion of good. If we love God, we will, without fail, be conformed to the image of Jesus. Having been conformed, we will be justified and glorified. This is all predicated on whether or not we love God. Certainly, we could make this lesson very short and simple by turning to just a few passages, such as **I John 5:3**, to learn that loving God is keeping His commandments. However, I want us to recognize that our relationship with God follows a similar pattern to any relationship we have, especially love relationships like marriage. Remember that even Paul used the marriage as a metaphor for our relationship with Jesus in **Ephesians 5:22-33**. When we consider the relationships we have had, I think we can see five distinct stages of each loving relationship. As we discuss these stages of a love relationship, examine your life. Where are you in this process with God? What do you need to do to progress to mature committed love with God?

Discussion:

I. Enchantment¹

- A. Love relationships begin with an enchantment phase. We often refer to this as infatuation. We have been introduced to someone, are attracted to them and are enchanted with everything about the relationship. In this circumstance, we constantly focus on the positive and seem to let the negatives slip to the side. We love everything the person does and just can't help but want to be with them all the time. Scientifically speaking, in this stage our brains actually secrete an endorphin that gives us feelings of happiness, contentment, well-being, completeness, etc. This period of the relationship is very much like being on a constant drug induced high. We can't imagine ever being unhappy in the presence of the object of our enchantment. Many people make their marriage commitment while this phase is still in full effect.
- B. Isn't this like our relationship with God? When we were first introduced to God and the forgiveness and grace He offered (**Ephesians 2:1-7**), we were enchanted. We were on an emotional high. We were happy and content. We were excited to study our Bibles, pray and attend the assemblies. Was someone having a home Bible study? We were there and couldn't understand all the people who didn't want to be. We see this in new converts all the time. We also see this in those raised by Christians about the time they get into college if they stick with the faith they were taught. It is like a drug high and every spiritual activity provides a feeling of well-being and happiness. In this stage, more mature Christians ask the enchanted to count the cost (**Luke 14:25-33**) and the enchanted believe they are willing to give up everything. They can't imagine any cost that won't be worth it. They gladly make the commitment.
- C. These often seem like Christians who are spiritually mature beyond their years, dedicated to spiritual things more than most. However, I suggest these are not spiritually mature; they are, rather, going through a natural relationship phase. Instead of it being with a person, it is with God. They have recognized His great love for them and become enamored. It is a good thing. It is a positive step in the right direction. It is necessary because it makes the commitment easier to make. However, love never ends here, not even with God.

II. Disenchantment

- A. If you are single, engaged or newly-married, you will probably not understand this point. However, your counterparts with more experience will. The enchantment phase of a love relationship

¹ The stages in this lesson are loosely based on information provided by www.relationship-help.com. Any scientific information or statistics were also found at that site.

never endures. Eventually it gives way to disenchantment. All those things that were overlooked within the enchantment phase start to rear their ugly heads. What was once seen as creative spontaneity will be seen as careless irresponsibility. What was once seen as an orderly, organized life will be seen as manipulative control. What was once seen as fearless leadership will be seen as arrogant, power madness. What was once seen as happy go lucky and easy going will be seen as laziness and sloth. As these stressers begin to infiltrate the marriage, the scripts and coping mechanisms we learned as children (often unhealthy) begin to take over. In the enchantment phase our happiness and contentment came from our relationship, now we turn to the mechanisms we developed over the years before the relationship to have happiness and contentment. For some, that means outbursts of anger, for others, drinking and drugs, for others sexual immorality, for others self-martyrdom and so on. We have become disenchanting, learning true happiness doesn't come from just being in the presence of our loved one.

- B. This happens with all Christians. There comes a day when we learn serving the Lord is not all about grace and love, but about obedience and sacrifice (**Romans 12:1; I Peter 1:13-16**). If we want the relationship to work, we are going to have to do some changing. Suddenly we learn that all that talk about carrying crosses was serious. It didn't feel like a cross before, but now it feels hideously burdensome. Growing in Christ takes work and no longer provides that immediate high. We can go to an assembly that used to leave us breathless and walk away without feeling anything. Sometimes we feel like we are just going through the motions. We have become disenchanting with God and our relationship with Him. Usually, we feel like we have lost something and think there must be something more to this relationship thing because we just don't feel like we used to.
- C. As all this is happening spiritually, life continues on. Satan continues to attack us. Then the coping mechanisms we developed before turning to the Lord start kicking in again. We turn to anger, arrogance, slander, immorality, materialism, etc. to regain the happiness we are no longer feeling in God. This is the place where we see people do things we know go against God's word but justify it saying God wants them to be happy. They are sure that is so because they remember the happiness they had in God at first and they have now lost it. They are sure if they can regain that happiness, they must be right with God again. We then pursue the courses familiar to us instead of walking God's narrow way (**Matthew 7:13-14**).
- D. At first, we may think this represents spiritual immaturity. We see it as backsliding from that great devotion the Christian once had. That is not the case. This is actually a necessary step on the road to true maturity. If you are at this point, it is not necessarily a bad thing. It means you are following the natural progression to maturity. However, this stage leads to the next all important hinge step. We are led to a fork in the road regarding our relationship with God.

III. Fork in the Road

- A. At this point, we hit a three-way fork in our relationship road. The road we choose will make all the difference. Allow me to assure you, you will have to take the road less traveled to have a good relationship with God.
- B. *Strive for the elusive enchantment phase again.*
 - 1. The easy high of the enchantment phase is very alluring. It took no work on our part and yet left us feeling happy and content. Because of this allure, many married couples take the fork they hope leads back to the first stage of the love relationship. They do this in one of two ways which also mirrors what Christians do in their relationship with God.
 - a. Ditch the present relationship and find someone else with whom they can be enchanted. According to relationship-help.com, more than half of those who take this route end up in another disenchanting relationship that fails. Some Christians simply turn their back on God to pursue other enchanting routes. We see this in **Luke 8:14** where riches and the pleasures of life turn the Christian away from God.
 - b. This other option is a little more subtle and yet just as dangerous. Some people reach the disenchantment stage and, wanting the easy high of the enchantment phase, seek for cheap, easy fixes. I see this all the time in marital counseling. Someone comes into my office saying they really want to work on their relationship, to get that loving feeling back. So, I give some practical hands on advice. For instance, I'll tell them about love

languages and how to communicate love. I'll tell them that for their spouse, to show love they have to give them words of affirmation or perform acts of service. They go home and try it for a couple of days, but it is kind of hard and doesn't show immediate results and they give up. Or they go to a marriage retreat. In the emotion of the retreat they reignite some of the old flame and have a great weekend. They come home rejuvenated and think the relationship is fixed but all they have done is taken another hit off the drug of enchantment. They haven't developed mature committed love for each other so they quickly enter the disenchantment phase again. Or they just try novel things. "Maybe if we try date nights." "Maybe if we took a vacation without the kids." Sometimes they even branch out into immorality. "Maybe if we branch out and have an open relationship." I almost hate to mention this in a sermon, but the rage today is what is called "swinging," in which married couples practice open sexual relationships with other couples. This is a sad attempt to get the drug like fix of the enchantment stage. These supposed quick fixes never work long term. They give an immediate short term high, but will leave you disenchanted again and in search of another hit on the enchantment drug. Some Christians are like this in their relationship with God. Instead of going through the hard work it takes to develop real love, they are allured to the easiness of the enchantment stage. They will try novel approaches to worship, assembling, studying. They constantly want to push the envelope to new and novel approaches. Maybe if we raise our arms, clap our hands, dress differently, arrange the chairs differently, change the order around, add some interpretive dancing, watch skits and plays, make the Lord's Supper a fellowship meal, have more conversation and less preaching, the list could go on and on. I'm not saying the way we do everything right now is the only way it can be done and if anyone wants to try something new they are taking the wrong fork in this road. However, there are too many Christians who are not interested in just doing what God says but in doing something new that makes them feel good. They judge how effective something is not based on how biblical it is but based on how it makes them feel. Even if we aren't doing something new, we can be guilty of this. How many hope a particular meeting or some particular class or even our Fall Focus might imbibe us with that easy, no work needed enchantment? I think we see an example of this in **Colossians 2:16-23**. People coming up with new and exciting means to serve God. Or we might look to **II Peter 2:1-3**, where teachers use sensuality, the feel good motivation, to trap people with error. One of the problems with this approach is it escalates. Even if the change or novelty we pursue right now is scriptural, if we are pursuing it because it makes us feel enchanted we will be in trouble. Like any addiction, eventually what we are doing now will no longer provide the high. Sooner or later, these will run out of scriptural options to provide the high they are looking for and, having trained themselves to look for the enchantment high, will inevitably choose enchantment over the Scriptures.

2. We need to understand this. The enchantment stage never lasts. No matter what we try, it will end up failing. We may feel we have reignited the enchantment and live for a time in happiness and contentment again, but eventually the novel approach we are taking or the new love we have gained will fade just as the old.

C. *Endure "Parallel Relationships"*.

1. According to relationship-help.com, some folks hit the disenchantment stage of their love relationship and refuse to leave for one reason or another. They think the spark is gone so they don't try to recapture it. However, because the work needed is too hard, they don't work on their relationship either. They develop what the site calls "parallel marriage." That is, even though they stay married, they put their energy into other things—work, school, children, hobbies, etc. Every once in a while, they may turn back to the marriage, but sensing the struggle again, they turn back to their "parallel relationship." The great majority of these claims their marriage is unsatisfactory.
2. How many Christians do this exact same thing? Because developing a real, true love relationship with God takes such work, some devote their attention elsewhere. They maintain appearances by attending the assemblies, but most of their energy is spent elsewhere. They hang on to their religion because they hope it will give them heaven in the end, but if honest,

they would say their relationship with God is unsatisfactory. This is essentially getting stalled out in the disenchantment stage. I think we see an example of this in Ephesus in **Revelation 2:1-7**. They were still going through the motions, however Jesus said they had left their first love. This path is dangerous. Since we are still maintaining a religious front, we may give ourselves false hope that we are really serving the Lord when we are not. I think of those in **Matthew 7:21-23** who had some kind of religion but weren't really doing the work it took to have a real relationship with God. Further, at any moment, if we believe our relationship with God is unsatisfactory we may abandon it, hopping over to the other of the wrong paths.

- D. *Work hard to make the relationship work.* Some married couples recognize that the enchantment stage, for all its wonder, was not true love. Therefore, they do not linger in disenchantment. They start working to develop a true, committed loving relationship. That is what we as Christians must do as well. According to **Matthew 7:13-14**, the narrow road is a difficult path. It takes hard work to navigate the proper way. **II Timothy 2:15** says we must do our best to present ourselves as workers who need not be ashamed before God. **II Peter 1:5-8** says we must make every effort to make the qualities God wants in us our own. Making this decision leads us to the next stage of our loving relationship.

IV. Work

- A. Go to any marriage retreat, seminar or counselor worth its salt and you will learn that a strong relationship takes work. You will learn that you have to work at positive communication. You will have to work at real problem solving. You will have to work at sacrificing yourself for the other person. You will have to work at change in your own life, all the while accepting that your partner may not work to change in their lives at all. The payoff is never immediate. It will take a good long while to have the feeling of real love and the happiness and contentment that comes with a true, committed loving relationship. But through constant hard work, those feelings grow.
- B. This is the way it is with our relationship with God. We have already mentioned three passages that talk about the work we have to do (**Matthew 7:13-14; II Timothy 2:15; II Peter 1:5-8**). We recognize we must work at rightly dividing the Word of God. That certainly seems boring in comparison to the breathtaking "worship experience" many churches want to offer. We learned we have to work hard at virtue, knowledge, self-control. That is certainly not an easy prospect in comparison to the churches that like to gloss over our sins with cheap and easy grace. We have to work hard at developing steadfastness and endurance, which means faithfulness in the face of hardship. That is certainly no fun in comparison to the churches that are teaching being a Christian means health and wealth.
- C. Look again at **II Peter 1:5-8** to see where our work needs to be focused. We must work on faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness, kindness and love. As we work on these things we will be fruitful, our relationship with God secure and we can rest contentedly in that relationship, having the happiness that comes from knowing God is with us reserving our home in heaven for us (**I Peter 1:3-5**). Understand, even as this stage leads to the final one of mature, committed love, there is a sense in which we never leave this stage. Even once mature love has been developed, it will always take work to maintain.

V. Mature, committed love

- A. Married couples that work on their relationships eventually develop a mature committed love for each other. No doubt, they must always keep working to maintain that love, but they have that love and the contentment that comes with it. This love is not necessarily very emotional. It doesn't give us the spikes of emotion, the drug like hits of enchantment. Rather, it provides the still, calm knowledge that we are in a relationship of trust and devotion. Have you ever wondered why movies are always about people falling in love and almost never about people making their relationships work over the long haul? It is because mature committed love is not as exciting. It has no butterflies in the pit of your stomach feeling. It is just a steady knowledge of right commitment. Hollywood would think it boring and so do many married people who are enraptured with enchantment. But those who have made it to this level in their marriages can tell you that the rapturous highs of the enchantment roller coaster have nothing in comparison with

the solid stability of a well-grounded relationship filled with mature, committed love and devotion. This is a level of unity and oneness that provides stability and confidence.

- B. As we continue to work on our relationship with God, refusing to take the cheap, easy route back to enchantment, we will develop a mature committed love for God. The difference between our earthly love relationships and our relationship with God is in marriage both of us have to do work. In our relationship with God, He has already developed the mature devoted love. He loved us so much He was willing to send Jesus to die for us. He is committed to us (**Romans 5:6-10; Hebrews 13:5-6**). His love is already grounded. We are the ones who have to work on true committed love.
- C. **I Corinthians 13:4-7** provides a great picture of love in any relationship. There are some principles here I think we can apply to our relationship with God. If we love God, we are patient, waiting on His timing instead of expecting Him to be on our timing. We are not boastful, acting as though God is lucky to have us on His side. We do not insist on our own way, but humbly submit to His. We do not become irritated or resentful when God doesn't do things the way we wanted or expected. Further, we believe and hope all things, that is, even when things look like they are going wrong, we trust God to work everything out for our good because we love Him. No doubt, as we said early on in this lesson, mature committed love for God means obeying His will without complaint or grumbling (**I John 5:3**).
- D. Here is the really great thing about this kind of love. The enchantment stage feels wonderful. However, it is a roller coaster. Based on nothing more than emotions and chemical reaction, the enchanted are at the mercy of their fickle feeling. An unexplained look, the wrong words and the enchanted are filled with fear that the relationship is faltering. Those who have worked hard to develop a strong, committed love relationship do not fear at every turn. They can rest in confidence that their relationship is strong, solid and stable no matter what the moment brings. This Christian doesn't need uncontrollable highs to feel right with God. He or she doesn't need novelty to feel spiritual. They love God and they know they are loved by God. Not because they feel butterflies in their stomach, but because they have developed a Bible-based, God-fearing relationship, working to grow spiritually as God has asked and they trust God's promises in return. Don't misunderstand, there will be strong emotions at times. These emotions, however, are not based on momentary circumstances but upon the solid foundation of a developed relationship.

Conclusion:

Do you love God? If so, where is your relationship with Him right now? Enchantment, Disenchantment, Fork in the Road, Work or Mature Committed Love? No doubt, when you develop mature committed love, you cannot quit working, that is a life-long process. Remember none of these stages is wrong. None of them are bad. They are all merely part of the process of growth in God. Where are you? What do you need to do to progress to mature love for God? How can we help?