



www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 5 – 2016

**“Women Don’t Like Nice Guys” –
Dating, Attraction and Christian Values:
Teaching Our Young People How to Fall in Love**

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Introduction

Is it true that women don’t like nice guys? This question is so popular that a Google search can easily yield over 640 million results.² If women truly dislike nice guys and instead turn their attention to “bad boys,” who are in fact narcissistic and dominant, then it will be a challenge to convince the young generation to value and live with the biblical perspective of love. In their book *Mating Intelligence Unleashed: The Role of the Mind in Sex, Dating, and Love*, psychologists Glenn Geher and Scott Barry Kaufman (2013) reviewed many existing scientific studies of mating and presented a more optimistic conclusion. Bad boys with aggressive and manipulative characteristics are actually not considered attractive by women. When women state that they dislike nice guys, they are referring to those “overly nice and submissive guys” who tend to lack self-confidence (p. 192). In fact, women prefer men who display not only the characteristic of assertiveness (i.e., confidence) but also the virtue of agreeableness or kindness (p. 183). At least two implications can be drawn from these research findings: (a) It is acceptable to be godly, because nice guys do not necessarily finish last; and (b) the church has the role of educating young people about falling in love and building a healthy long-term relationship in the midst of inundations of false ideas of love from a variety of different sources, especially social media.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to develop an understanding of love based on the Bible and examine how existing research aligns with the biblical perspective of love. We will then

² Google asked on April 21, 2020.

propose how the theology of love can be practically applied to teach our young people how to fall in love.

A. Theology of Love

1. Love Is the Central

To understand love correctly, we should begin with the Bible. As revivalist David J. Lewis (1900) once stated, “Love is the center of all God’s dealings, and all of His laws; as love is the center of the Bible, the center of Christianity” (p. 265). Specifically, the Bible provides us with detailed information about the nature of love and forms of love in our relationships.

2. Nature of Love

From the Bible, we first learn that love is good because it originates from God. In 1 John 4:7, the Apostle John wrote that “love is from God ... for God is love.” Oswald Chambers (1985) further elucidated the meaning of this scripture by emphasizing “the eternal fact that God is love, not, God is loving. God and love are synonymous. Love is not an attribute of God, it is God; whatever God is, love is” (p. 12). In the Book of Genesis, the climax of creation occurred on the sixth day when God created man and woman to experience His love through intimate fellowship with Him and enjoy their love for one another through marriage (Gen 1: 26–31, 2:18–24). Love was created by the Lord and was a beautiful reflection of His image because “God, as Trinity, exists in a fellowship of love” (Ferguson, 1987, p. 31). Love was also perfect and good, indicated first through the intimate fellowship between humans and God (Gen 2:15–20) and then later through the transcendent interaction between husband and wife (Gen 2:23–24). The implication of being created in God’s love is that man and woman were created with the desire and ability to love, as well as to develop healthy relationships with others. The constant, intimate fellowship with God provided man and woman with a sense of security, acceptance, and significance. In perfect love, they did not feel any shame (Gen 2:25) and “the result was a totally secure self-image, which is possible only when one’s identity is totally in God” (Kirwan, 1984, p. 76).

The second truth we derive from the Bible is that love can become agonizing and grotesque when distorted by sin. The fall of Adam and Eve (Gen 3) ushered sin into the world and produced

negative repercussions on human beings and their relationship with God. Sin has swept darkness and corruption into the perfect, loving relationship among human beings who, in their depravity, have become competitive, incapable of empathizing, rebellious against authority, and unable to love (Erickson, 1992). This warped relationship among human beings is clearly illustrated by Genesis 3:11–16. Van Leeuwen (1990) argued that one implication of this broken human relationship in marriage is that male’s original dominion over his wife and family has now become male domination. Sherlock (1996) echoed Van Leeuwen’s view, emphasizing that even though the relationship between men and women continues, the original loving partnership “has turned into rivalry” and “dominion has become corrupted into exploitation” (pp. 42–43).

Theologian Millard Erickson (1992) believed that sin has further distorted the identity of human beings. After the fall, human beings have assumed the identity of sinners before God (Rom 3:23), possessing characteristics such as enslavement, flight from reality, denial of sin, self-deceit, insensitivity, self-centeredness, and restlessness. Kirwan (1984) postulated that the three essential characteristics of human identity after the fall are rejection, shame, and weakness or helplessness. He elaborated on the meaning of Genesis 3:7–10 as below:

When Adam told God that he hid because he was afraid, he was saying in essence, “I have lost God, so I no longer belong. I am afraid and insecure”. He was also saying, “I have lost perfection, so I no longer feel a sense of self-esteem. Instead I feel guilty and ashamed.”... Adam was God’s foreman, commissioned to subdue the earth and able to live in happiness without fear . . . Now he no longer had that strength. He undoubtedly felt inferior and insignificant. (pp. 81–82)

In other words, human beings have been stripped of their sense of security and harmony as fully illustrated in Genesis 3:7–10. Such feelings of shame, weakness, fear, and insecurity cripple their ability to enjoy fellowship with God and loving relationships with one another.

The third truth we gain from the Bible is that the goodness and beauty of love distorted by sin have been redeemed and restored by Jesus Christ. In describing Christ’s redemption, Dillistone (1983) wrote, “By identifying Himself with humans in their temptations, trials, hopelessness, suffering and death [Jesus] paid an immeasurably

costly price and brought into being a new humanity, bearing His own image and committed to following His example” (p. 488). Christ’s redemptive work brings a new reality to humankind which includes not only the restoration of the relationship between God and human beings but also reconciliation among humans (Sherlock, 1996). Through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, human beings regain the ability to love and enjoy its goodness and beauty. As theologian, Sinclair B. Ferguson (1989) stated, “The key to such restoration lies in the recovery of man to his original honor, dignity, privilege and responsibility. Reconciling all things to God, therefore, means fundamentally restoring to man the image that he reflected perfectly at creation but later marred by his sin” (p. 10).

3. Forms of Love

Other than the nature of love, the Bible also informs us that love is multifaceted. In his classic book *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis (1960) thoughtfully analyzed the four types of human love including affection (*storge*), friendship (*phileo*), erotic love (*eros*), and love of God (*agape*). Many bible scholars such as Charles Stanley (2015) and John Piper (1975) agreed with Lewis’s belief that different types of love can be found in the Bible. For instance, sacrificial love (*agape*) is beautifully expressed in John 3:16, brotherly and friendship love (*phileo*) can be found in Hebrews 13:1, and romantic or erotic love (*eros*) is fully illustrated in Song of Solomon 1:1–4. These forms of love have been well discussed in many pieces of Christian literature for centuries.

B. Major Research Findings of Love in Psychological literature

Since the 1970s, psychologists have begun to pay attention to the scientific study of love and intimate relationships. Researchers approached the topic from various perspectives, and some research findings provided interesting evidence to illustrate and support the biblical perspective of love. For example, based on the attachment theory of love, psychologists conducted a number of studies and found that adults who have insecure attachment patterns (e.g., feeling anxious about relationships or avoiding relationships) tend to have a less positive experience of love and greater relationship dissatisfaction, echoing the biblical truth that the feelings of shame, fear, and insecurity due to sin can weaken the human ability to enjoy

loving relationships (Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw, 1989). Attachment psychologists believe that insecure adults, who struggled in their relationship with their parents during childhood, hold pessimistic beliefs and expectations for their love relationship. Therefore, they have greater chances of experiencing relationship conflicts and domestic violence due to their failure in controlling their anger, jealousy, and pain. On the contrary, individuals with secure attachment are optimistic about their love relationship and are more willing to tolerate differences as well as work through problems. Consequently, they are able to have “more stable romantic and marital relationships, greater intimacy, higher relationship satisfaction, and stronger commitment to their partners and families” (Shaver, Mikulincer, and Feeney, 2009, p. 495).

The *Love-Styles Theory and Triangular Theory of Love* assert a similar theme that love is multifaceted, consistent with what Scripture has already revealed through the ages. The Love-Styles Theory was proposed by Alan Lee in 1970s. Through extensive literature review and interviewing of subjects about their past love experiences, Lee (1977) identified six common love styles which include *agape* (selfless love), *eros* (passionate love), *mania* (obsessive and jealous love), *ludus* (game-playing love), *pragma* (practical love seeking compatibility in social and personal qualities), and *storge* (friendship or companionship love). Research indicated that the most affirming love style is *agape*, the least preferred love type is *ludus*, and people tend to date those who share a similar love style (Hahn and Blass, 1997). However, some love styles, such as *mania* and *ludus*, or *storge* and *mania*, have difficulties finding an appropriate match since the expectations are so different that conflict is inevitable (Lee, 1988).

The Triangular Theory of Love was proposed by Robert Steinberg in the mid-1980s. According to Steinberg (1986), love consists of three components which are intimacy (i.e., close and bonded feelings), passion (i.e., romantic, physical and sexual drives), and commitment (i.e., decision to love and maintain the loving relationship). Eight types of love can be generated by the different combinations of these three components which include nonlove (casual relationships, absence of all three components), liking (intimacy alone), infatuation (passion alone, “love at first sight”), empty love (commitment alone), romantic love (intimacy and

passion), companionate love (intimacy and commitment), and consummate/complete love (intimacy, passion and commitment). Steinberg believed that some types of love, such as fatuous love, infatuated love, and empty love are unhealthy and highly vulnerable to distress. Consummate love is the healthiest type of loving relationship even though it is difficult to be attained and maintained.

To further validate the aforementioned research findings about love in psychology literature, we conducted a large scale survey among emerging adults (i.e., age 18–25 as defined by Jeffrey Arnett, 2000) to examine their love styles attitude, their sense of attachment, and how the two variables may relate to their marital/dating relationship satisfaction. A total of 445 emerging adults participated in the study and completed various standardized instruments, such as the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991), the Love Attitudes Scale—Short Form (Hendrick, Hendrick, and Dicke, 1998), and the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, Dicke, and Hendrick, 1998). The results of one-way ANOVA analysis indicated a preference for three types of love: *eros* (passionate love), *agape* (altruistic love), and *storge* (friendship love) are significantly more popular or preferable than the *pragma* (practical love), *mania* (possessive, dependent love), and *ludus* (game-playing love). A stepwise regression analysis showed that an emerging adult who has a secure attachment pattern, stronger *eros* and *agape* love, and has less *ludus* and *mania* love will have a higher chance of experiencing a satisfactory relationship with his/her partner/spouse. In sum, our study not only confirmed the existence of different love types but also validated the importance of having secure attachment and certain love styles (i.e., *agape* and *eros*) in marital/dating relationship satisfaction.

C. Teaching Young People to Love

Both the biblical perspective of love and research findings concerning love from the psychological literature provide at least the following five implications for the church to teach young people how to fall in love: (1) find secure love in God, (2) cultivate *agape* love, (3) practice erotic love within the boundary of marriage, (4) develop skills to maintain love, and (5) seek God’s guidance.

1. Find Secure Love in God

Since the sense of secure attachment plays a key role in successful loving relationship, it would be beneficial for the church to help young people understand and internalize their identity in Christ. Doing so increases their sense of security in relationships and diminishes the chances of exhibiting anxiety or avoidance. This may also enable them to take more appropriate approaches to their loving relationships. It is important to have young people come to the realization that they are created to be God's beloved. This love is graphically portrayed in the parable of the lost son in Luke 15:11–31, as well as in Ephesians 1:4 which declares that God has intentionally created each individual to be His Beloved: "Long before [God] laid down earth's foundations, He had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of His love, to be made whole and holy by His love" (New American Standard Bible).

So, what is the best way to guide young people into experiencing the love of God? To experience the love of God, young people should learn to embrace God's messages of love in the Bible, believing them as truth. The Bible paints a radical image of God's view of His children which should translate into their view of themselves and others. Through flowing words and beautiful descriptions of the Lord's divine love, Zephaniah 3:17 captures this picture: "The LORD your God ... will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy." This verse clearly depicts the abundant devotion and tenderness that God possesses for His people. Rather than turning His face away in shame of His children's failures or sins, the Lord boasts of His love for them through His shouts of joy. This unchanging, rejoicing love of God for the young person provides the value to his/her existence. Because he/she is already loved by the Creator, there is no need for the person to strive to be accepted by the world and meet its ever-changing expectations. Through Christ's work on the cross, God has accepted him/her completely (Heb 10:14). For young people, this truth can shatter their chains of insecurity and usher them into a golden future where they can feel free to be who they are without fear of rejection. This freedom can help spark new motivation for positive behaviors in the young person's interaction with his/her partner.

Another practice that may enrich young people’s experience of God’s love is taking time to revitalize their spirit by basking in God’s all-embracing love throughout the day. In exhorting Christians to keep themselves in the love of God, Oswald Chambers (1985) elucidated, “Keep means work. It is not a lazy floating, it is work” (p. 19). It may benefit young people if they pause to hear God whisper “My Beloved” to them, as well as meditate on how God watches over them with complete joy. Henri Nouwen (2002) stated:

[Experiencing our Belovedness] means letting the truth of our Belovedness become enfolded in everything we think, say, or do.... Every time you feel hurt, offended or rejected, you have to dare to say to yourself: These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God’s eyes, [and] called the Beloved from all eternity. (pp. 45, 49)

Furthermore, Nouwen advised Christians to always give thanks to God for choosing them as His Beloved. In other words, young people need to constantly lift up praises to the glorious God for His wondrous love. As C. S. Lewis (1994) explained, praising God begets more joy and celebration in each Christian: “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation ... [The] delight is incomplete till it is expressed” (p. 179). Therefore, exuding streams of praise and thanksgiving to God will more completely express and release within the young people the full fountain of joy and celebration.

2. Cultivate Agape Love

Agape love refers to the love that is sacrificial and completely dedicated to the well-being of another person (Stanley, 2015). In other words, *agape* love is a selfless or altruistic love. We are called to “walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved [*agape*] us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2). *Agape* lovers choose to love in abundance and do not expect anything in return. Other characteristics of *agape* lovers include being patient and non-emotional, forgiving, non-demanding, willing to support others, and believing in honesty in relationships (Hahn and Blass, 1997). J. A. Lee (1998) believed that *agape* love is difficult to be practiced in adult dating or marital relationships due to the “enlightened self-interest that pervades the ideology of our

commercial, political, and even educational institutions. A gentle, patient, caring love without motives of self-interest is difficult to find even in those helping professions supposedly organized to supply it in the form of healing and therapy” (p. 48). To help young people cultivate agape love by overcoming their self-interest, we can recommend them to practice the self-management model based on Galatians 6:7–8: “Do not be deceived; God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”

Assume Brad and Julie have planned to enjoy a date at the theaters and watch the movie “Rogue One: A Star War Story.” They agree to meet at 7:00 pm. Brad waits for Julie at the gate, but she does not arrive until 7:45 pm. At that moment, Brad has two choices laid out before him. He can decide to please the flesh, serve himself, and manipulate Julie by screaming at her and storming away. However, he could also choose to please the Spirit, serve God, and minister to Julie by listening to her and ensuring that she is safe.

However, good intentions can be challenging to maintain. Brad may be able to lovingly minister to Julie on days that he feels that he can be kind and sacrificial toward her. However, on other days, he may find himself struggling and wanting to give in to his flesh and belittling her instead. Similarly, Julie may also work diligently at being patient and understanding but may also find herself battling the urge to quarrel with Brad when he gets demeaning. Both feel that the standard is too high to reach. Like Paul, they say that “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom 7:15). However, thank God that He did not save us for us to live the perfect Christian life or show Christian love through our own striving. Along with our salvation, He has given us the power to live godly lives. In John 15:5, Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Demonstrating agape love is fruit that we will bear if we abide in Christ through constantly connecting with Him through prayer and letting His life flow into our lives. When we feel a struggle coming on, we lift up our hearts to Jesus and focus on Him, trusting that He will carry us through that very moment and the next and the next until we experience victory.

3. Practice Erotic Love within the Boundary of Marriage

Erotic love refers to passionate love, and the experience is normally emotional, intense, and affectionate (Hahn and Blass, 1997). Due to the high psychophysiological involvement and experiential salience, Steinberg (1986) perceived that passionate love is not only necessary for short-term relationships but is also moderately important for maintaining long-term relationships. However, passionate love tends to have low stability, especially when erotic lovers believe in “love at first sight” while expecting “intimacy, including sexual intimacy, right from the beginning of a relationship” (Hahn and Blass, 1997, p. 597). Engaging in sexual intimacy outside of marriage not only contradicts the counsel of Scripture (e.g., Gal 5:19,

1 Cor 6:18) but also leads to the pitfall of increasing one’s chances of divorce. For example, analyzing the data from the three waves of the National Survey of Family Growth collected between 2002 and 2013, Wolfinger (2016) found that women with zero to one sexual partner before marriage were the least likely to divorce, as compared to women with two or more sexual partners before marriage. Even for the women who married in the 1990s and had one sexual partner before marriage, their odds of divorce were 75% higher than the women who married as virgins. For women married in the 2000s, the odds of divorce for those who had one sexual partner before marriage increased to 154% compared to their peers who married as virgins. Therefore, practicing erotic love within the boundary of marriage is not only biblical but also allows young couples to reap the rewards of a lasting marriage. As such, the church can provide guidance toward cultivating a relationship that honors biblical boundaries by using principles such as those advocated by Cloud and Townsend (2000) in their book *Boundaries in Dating*. Cloud and Townsend suggested that dating individuals should learn to recognize the signs of speeding too quickly into physical intimacy, the possible contributing factors of being too hasty, the advantages of delaying sex until marriage, and the strategies they can adopt to slow down the physical over-involvement during dating.

4. Develop Skills to Maintain Love

To have a successful dating relationship, both J. A. Lee (1988) and Steinberg (1988) believed that a person should identify his/her

preferred style of love and then find a partner with the love style that will match his/her choice. In addition, supports need to be provided for couples to resolve any love style differences. However, Lee (1988) warned that couples who share similar love styles may not necessarily experience a lasting relationship (e.g., both partners have the ludus love style). A person's love style preference may also change as a result of time, specific situations, and experience. Therefore, it is valuable for dating young individuals to learn the skills that will maintain their loving relationships.

Byrne and Murnen (1998) suggested that three factors play a key role in promoting and sustaining a loving relationship: similarity (in values, attitudes, beliefs, interests, and personality), positive evaluation (in words and behaviors), and continuous excitement and stimulation (in various aspects of life together). Jeffery H. Larson (2000) further advised dating individuals to assess ten similarities in their relationships which are significant predictors of marital satisfaction. These ten similarities include the importance of marriage, the perception of gender roles, career development, finance (i.e., material wealth), autonomy (i.e., the extent of individuality and privacy in marriage), sex expectations, family planning, couple boundaries (i.e., the extent of disclosing marriage issues to others), religious beliefs and practice, and general background characteristics (e.g., ethnicity and race, socio-economic status, age, educational level). Other specific skills young individuals may need to learn are skills for communication, conflict resolution, flexibility (e.g., sharing leadership equally, switching roles or responsibilities), and creating intimacy. All these are the strengths of happy couples identified by Olson and Olson (2000) after they surveyed 5,153 happily married couples and 5,127 unhappily married couples.

5. Seek God's Guidance

Young people today are not only eager to have a dating partner but are also willing to seek one through online dating. According to the Pew Center Research, online dating among young adults age 18 to 24 has surged up from 10% in 2013 to 27% in 2015, a triple increase (Smith and Anderson, 2016). The results of the Pew Research Center survey also indicated that 23% of adults agree that people who use online dating sites are desperate. Whether this is true or not, one important exhortation from God's Word is to "trust in theLORDwith

all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov 3:5–6). Although young people would do well to follow the above principles for establishing a godly and positive love relationship, the most important principle of all is to trust and seek God’s guidance. The God who created us in our mother’s womb, ordained our days before one of them came to be, and also sent His Son to be a Sacrifice to redeem us from our sins is intimately involved in every aspect of our lives, even our love and marriage life (Psalm 139:13–16; John 3:16).

Conclusion

Even though nine out of ten people marry by age 50 in the U.S., the projected divorce rate is estimated to be 40 to 50 percent, and the rate of divorce risk is even higher for those who are remarried (American Psychological Association, n.d.). For young people who live in a culture of divorce in the midst of a rising generation of narcissism among millennials (Pedersen, n.d.), it is a challenge to learn how to love and develop healthy long-term loving relationships. It is imperative for the church to hold on to the biblical truth of love, recognize the scientific research findings that are consistent with the biblical perspective of love, and support the young people to love successfully by finding their secure love in God, cultivating agape love, practicing erotic love within the boundary of marriage, developing essential skills to maintain love, and above all, seeking God’s guidance.

A great treasure unfolds for a couple who respects God’s truths and that dedicate themselves to highest forms of true love.

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