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DATING AND RELATIONSHIPS

FANTASY BY BETTY CHURCHILL • CHAPTER EXCERPT

Fantasy is a collection of insights from several contributing writers, about all the stuff women talk about and some they don't, but should. Sex, dating, relationships, the "m" word (not marriage, the other one), but, of course, we talk about marriage, too, as well as the beautiful people, the need to be in control and how God, Jesus and the Spirit fit into it all.

Like its male counterpart, Flesh, Fantasy is divided into three sections: small group discussion material, topical articles, and a month of daily devotionals.

Partial List of Topics: Masturbation, How Far is Too Far, The Role of Fathers, Confession-Forgiveness, Community, Filling of the Spirit, Cosmetic Surgery, Worship, Singleness, Faith, Homosexuality, Why Wait?, Body/Self Image, and Pornography.

Contributions by Henry Cloud and Shellie R. Warren



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FANTASY

A Love Story, Part 1 For Better or For Worse

By Will Walker

My wife has been fighting a battle with anxiety and sometimes depression. It feels like more like a war, actually, a never-ending war. At times we feel that this is just how life is going to be and that we will always be frustrated by our helplessness. It really pisses us off, if you want to know the truth. Why won't God answer our prayer for healing? Why can't Debbie just have one day without worry or fear? One day!

The most troublesome times for me are the days when Debbie says she doesn't feel like God loves her and isn't even sure that He exists. I can hear the despair in her voice as she articulates

the thought that her life might be meaningless. I don't know what to say on those days. If hope for change is linked to our experience of God's love for us, which I think is true, then you can imagine my concern for Debbie.

Everybody has their battles, and relationships are perhaps the largest battleground there is. Our emotions toward the opposite sex are so inexplicably strong, and many have been hurt so badly. And as if relationships were not hard enough by themselves, we also carry around the baggage of personal struggles—neglect, abuse, shame, addiction, loneliness. On one hand, we may wonder how God could love us as we are. On the other hand, we may doubt God's love precisely because He has allowed us to be as we are. These are real issues, troublesome questions. I don't know what to say, exactly, except that these feelings are actually quite normal when it comes to our relationship with God, as normal as they would be in any love relationship. I mean, how do you know anyone loves you?

DATING GAMES

You could say that you know someone loves you because he tells you he loves you or because he acts in such a way that would indicate that he loves you. But I'm not sure these are always reliable sources of knowledge. Having watched college students date for a decade now, I can say with confidence that everything is backward in the world of dating. At first it feels as if it is all about this person you like and how you want to do things for him because you like him. But really, you are doing those things to get that person to like you. It's hard to tell if people love other people or just the idea of being loved.

As an observer, I can only conclude that nobody really knows what they're doing in this area. For the most part, it's like taking a multiple-choice test that you didn't study for. One of the things you want to say or do at any given moment is probably the right thing, but then there's the always confusing "none of the above." The reason some people seem to be better at dating than others is the same reason that some people are better test takers. It has nothing to do with real knowledge, I'm pretty sure. This is why books on dating are so popular. Could it be that someone came into possession of the test—discovered the four hidden secrets to unlocking the seven mysteries

of relationships? It's unlikely, but we'll give it a try anyway.

When I was in college, the formula for dating success was group dates. This is where a group of people go out and try to pretend that specific people in the group are not attracted to other specific people. No pressure. Everyone is just friends. One time, some guys asked a group of girls out on a geriatric group date. Seriously, they all dressed up as old people and ate dinner at 4:30 in the K-Mart deli. Then they played canasta or something before "retiring to their quarters" at the late hour of 8:30.

Group dates were doomed to fail because guys are always trying to figure out which girl—in any given group of girls—they are most interested in. So we all started listening to this tape series about courtship and decided it was time to get serious about dating. We said things like "I would like to pursue you" and "May I court you with the intention of marriage?" It was pretty intense, but the girls loved it.

A few years later everyone was kissing dating goodbye. I wonder if that is anything like what my friend Jeremy recommends—dating, but without any of the related terminology. It seems to work for people, but I always feel awkward asking a guy how things are going with his girlfriend ... that ... he's ... not dating.

Personally, I was never very good at dating. I was pretty moody in college. A real jerk sometimes, if you want to know the truth. I remember waking up one Thursday morning in February of my freshman year, feeling like I needed to get away for a few days. So I took a road trip. I didn't tell anyone where I was going or when I'd be back. I just left. The following Tuesday night, I finally made it back to campus. The thing about that particular Tuesday was that it was Valentine's Day.

So I was dating this girl, Jennifer. The first thing I did when I got back was go up to her dorm room. Besides being pretty upset that I had been gone for five days and did not call her even once, she was glad to see me. In fact, she started giving me all these cards and gifts. I was quite surprised to see that she had missed me so much. About the time she gave me the third or fourth gift, I realized that I had forgotten Valentine's Day. Oh man, there is no recovering from that. To make matters worse, all the single girls in the hall had drifted down

to Jennifer's room to live vicariously through her Valentine's Day. Witnesses. There was no escape. What was I going to say?

After she finished crying, I went back to my dorm room and tried to sleep it off. Jennifer, on the other hand, did not merely sleep it off. That's one thing about girls. They can't let bygones be bygones. Seeing as how Jennifer would never forget that I forgot, and how I would not be able to go to her room anymore on account of the fact that all those girls sat up all night talking about how I was the devil, I didn't know what to do. So I broke up with her. I told her that I needed to be alone for a while, that I really shouldn't be around people. That was probably true.

I met Debbie three weeks later. Apparently three weeks was all the alone time I needed. Isn't that the worst—to be the last person that someone else dated before he got married? The only thing that could be worse is if that person decided to write about it in a book. Some people.

That's probably more than you wanted to know about my dating woes. All I want to say is that dating involves a lot of games—always putting your best foot forward, worrying about what you just said, discerning what everyone else thinks about the relationship. And worst of all is the ever-present reality that it could all end. I'm not against dating. There are many wonderful things about the dating world. I am just saying that it's difficult to know if anyone really loves you—the real you—because of all the games. That is why we must not think of our relationship with God in the same way we think of dating.

Maybe nobody would say they think of God that way, but we certainly act like it at times. We perform so God will notice us, which somehow makes us feel like we are more loved by God. When we mess up, we act as though God will react by giving us the silent treatment or by breaking up with us. We plead our case with other Christians in an attempt to gain the momentum of peer approval, as if God could be swayed to forgive if enough of His friends were on our side. And when things go bad—when my wife seems like she will never get better—I am tempted to think that God is just not that interested in me anymore. Maybe the romance is over and this is all coming to an end. We may not say it, but we definitely play the dating

games with God. But God does not think of us that way. He thinks of us as His bride.

DEATHBLOWS

Marriage is nothing like dating, because you live with each other. You can't hide the real you. Debbie and I had no idea how opposite we were or how hard marriage would be. We had told each other going in that divorce would not be an option for us. That is how we made it through the first year. We had to. The second year was better, having learned to communicate and work through things. Now we have been married nine years, and we are perfect. Well, we are perfect in every way; except...we have lots of problems.

Since Debbie is more relationally in tune than I am, she usually notices the problems before I do. And since she is always thinking about the future of our relationship, she is able to forecast the problems that are coming, sort of like a tornado warning. She loves me and has nothing but our best interests in mind, but because I never see the warnings coming, I refer to them as deathblows. The first deathblow occurred six months into our marriage when she said she missed her dad (serious threat to my manhood). Then there was the time when she said something along the lines of "I love you, but I don't have any feelings for you." (Translation: I love you because I vowed to love you, but I don't

feel like I love you.) I never see it coming, I tell you, never.

We work through the deathblows, and though the process can be painful, it is deeply meaningful and satisfying. We never think about giving up on each other. We're married. You don't just break up in marriage.

Relationships are frustrating if you want them to get better. Debbie would never be frustrated with me if she didn't want to experience greater intimacy. Deathblows lead to honesty and hard conversations, which produce character and hope. Marriage is like any commitment in that you don't suddenly get to a point where you are ready. Rather, it is the binding commitment of marriage that forces you to persevere and grow. I cannot prove that Debbie loves me, but I believe her. The same goes for God.

ANYONE WANT TO MARRY A PROSTITUTE?

God knew we would have a difficult time believing that He loves us, which I think is why He used the metaphor of marriage throughout Scripture as a way to describe His love for us.

One thing I notice in Scripture is that we are not portrayed as a stunningly pure bride. In fact, we are usually depicted as whores and adulterers, dirty

outcasts. It's as though God wants to make it clear that His love for us is pure and unconditional. This is illustrated powerfully in the Old Testament book of Hosea. Basically, God told Hosea to marry a prostitute, knowing that she would be unfaithful to him. This does not sound like good advice. Why would God do that?

1 The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."

2 So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. (Hosea 3:1-2)

God wanted to illustrate the radical nature of His love for His people, unfaithful as they may be. Notice the emotion and power of His love:

When my people were young, I loved them like a son, and I called them out of slavery in Egypt. But the more I called them, the farther they departed from me. They ignored my voice and worshipped other gods. But I did not leave. I held them by the hand and taught them to walk. I rescued them, but they never acknowledged my help. My people are obsessed with turning away from me.

But how can I give up on them? How can I let them be destroyed? I can't bear the thought of such things. My compassion is aroused for them. I will not forsake them, because I am God and not a man (Hosea 11:1-9, paraphrased).

God is God and not a man. He does not play our games or waver in His affection like we do. Maybe one reason we do not always feel like God loves us is that we are not listening to Him. Maybe we are obsessed with other lovers. Maybe we are all too aware of how unlovable we are. These are deathblows. But God would say such things only because He cares about the relationship. He would never think about leaving us. We're married.

HOW DO YOU KEEP BELIEVING?

I ran into an old friend from college recently at a coffee shop. I hadn't seen Jeff in seven years. I remember him as this commando Christian guy who listened to the Bible on tape while he ate dinner. The first thing he told me was that he had "chucked the faith." I inquired, "'Chucked it' as in you left and came back to the faith, or 'chucked it' as in you still don't believe?" It was the latter. We talked for a while after that.

The conversation was refreshing because I didn't feel like I needed to explain or prove anything. Jeff already knew everything. At one point we started talking about the Bible. He said, "Man, Paul was either freaking brilliant or tripping on something. His arguments are airtight." I agreed, then told him that I had mostly been reading the Gospels for the past couple of years.

I started talking about the way Jesus interacted with people and how simple and revolutionary His ideas were. As I recounted my discovery of the person of Christ, I began to talk about how Jesus never really asked anyone what they knew or what they could do. He was always asking people things like "Do you love Me? Will you follow Me? Who do you say that I am?" All of His invitations were so overtly relational. It's like Jesus wants us to marry Him. I was thinking these things out loud, and at this

point Jeff interrupted me, “It’s weird that you say that. I never read the Gospels much. I was always reading the Epistles. Maybe I married a set of ideas and arguments instead of a person.”

He asked me how I could keep believing.

The only thing I could think to say, the only thing that I felt was true, was “Dude, I married Jesus. I’m in.”

He asked me if I ever had questions or doubts.

“Of course I do,” I said. “There are all kinds of things I don’t know, and the life that Jesus has led me into is frustrating sometimes, but I’m not breaking up with Him because of it. We’re married. I couldn’t imagine life without Jesus.”

Jeff countered, “But you would be okay if you stopped believing. You really would. At first it felt really weird to me, but after a while, I was okay. I learned different ways to cope and found other things to give my energy to. You don’t think you would be okay, but you would be after a while.”

I sat there for a minute and tried to imagine what it would be like to break up with Jesus and whether I could actually be okay someday. I sat there quietly, looking away in thought. Thinking about it made my heart hurt. After a minute or two, I looked at Jeff and said, “I wouldn’t be okay. It would feel like divorce to me. In marriage you become one with the other person. Divorce would literally feel like death. If Debbie or Ethan died, I would never get over that. Sure, I would cope and get on with life, but I would always feel a sense of loss, like part of me died. That is how it would be if somehow I walked away from Jesus. It would never be okay. We are married.”

A BETTER QUESTION

I do not always feel loved by Debbie, and she does not always feel loved by me. That’s just the nature of being human—finite and insecure and self-centered. If we were dating, I might react by trying harder to be lovable or else by giving up and moving on to someone else. But we are married. We vowed to love one another through thick and thin, good and bad. And that is exactly the kind of commitment God has made to us. He loves us no matter how many times we turn away from His voice. It makes me think that there is a better question than “Does God love me?” Perhaps the better question is “Are we married?”

If God and I are married, then I can be confident of His love toward me. That doesn’t automatically make me feel better about my struggles, but it is a necessary starting point. Once I take Him at His word—that He loves me—then I can move on to trust that His love is good. Even in hard times I am compelled by God’s love to believe that He has not forgotten me and is in fact working things out for my best interest. Granted, my best interest may not be the kinds of material and temporal pleasures that I often want. But protecting me from such things is part of the way God builds my character and helps me become the radiant bride I was meant to be. So when I feel like God doesn’t love me, one possibility is that my idea of love is simply not as good as God’s idea of love.

While we are taking God at His word, we can also reflect on His undying—even irrational—commitment to His people throughout history. He always wants what is best for His people. He provides what they need and protects them in times of trouble. He even disciplines them when they start thinking that someone else could love them better than God. I’m sure they did not feel loved in times of discipline, but that again shows our tendency to see things only from our perspective.

When your relationship with God is hard, even painful, don't settle for wondering if God loves you. Go back to the marriage vows. God said He will never leave nor forsake you, that He loves you as a daughter, and that He will present you as a spotless bride. You can probably even think of times in your life when you have experienced God's love. Those times help us remember God's commitment to us and give us hope for the future. This is why we can't merely date God, because we need the anchor of His unflinching commitment.

WHEN THE HONEYMOON IS OVER

The difficulty of marriage is day-to-day life. It's not always exciting. You argue about the position of the toilet seat and worry about finances. Life tends to occupy so much of your energy that it's hard to focus on things like intimacy and a growing appreciation for each other. Sometimes that's the way it is with God. Our day-to-day lives drown out God's presence and work in our lives. So, how do you gain deeper intimacy with God?

There is a lot of advice out there about how to grow in your relationship with God. Much of it is good, but we often go wrong by turning advice into formulas—trusting a set of activities to produce intimacy. The reality is that you are a person in a relationship, and relationships do not have formulas. You mature and change and find new ways to relate to God. You may go through seasons of deep intimacy with God, as if He is right next to you all the time. And then there may be seasons of life when God seems silent. The same advice will not be adequate for all seasons and dynamics of a relationship. That said, marriage is not a passive endeavor. Intimacy with God will require intentional effort on our part—not to impress God, as in dating, but to love and serve God, as in marriage.

The problem with hard work, of course, is that we usually don't feel like working all that hard. We have good intentions, but we get sidetracked or tired or simply weighed down by the worries of life. We are prone to want something easier and less permanent, like dating. And that gets us back to where we started, playing games and feeling at times like God does not love us. So, how do you make the marriage work? What do you do?

A Love Story, Part 2 Because He Loves Me

By Will Walker

This is only a book. It cannot make you do anything. In fact, nobody can *make* you do anything. Even God, though I'm sure He is able to, will not force His will upon you. You have the freedom to think and believe and do whatever you desire. And that is a good way to characterize the fall of humankind—we are all bent on doing what we want to do. But in the case of wanting to do good, we often do not do what we want to do, and in the case of not wanting to do bad, we in fact do exactly what we did not want to do. We are complex that way.

Don Miller says that, many times in life, the things we want most are not the things we need.¹ C. S. Lewis described the dilemma in terms of first and second wants.² He said that when first wants come first, we get the second wants thrown in. But when the second wants take priority, we end up with nothing. For example, feeling valuable is a legitimate first want. And let's say that feeling the approval of your friends is a second want. It's not wrong to want it, but it is not the most important thing in terms of your identity and sense of worth. If you derive your value more from what people say about you than you do from what God says about you, then you end up insecure, because people's opinions are subjective and fickle. You also come off looking pretty needy and will probably not sense that people like that about you. So in the end you don't feel valuable or liked. But if you derive your value from what God thinks about you—that He knows everything about you and still loves you more than you could ever imagine—then you are likely to feel incredibly secure about your identity as a child of God. That kind of quiet confidence is attractive and will quickly gain the favor of people around you, not that you need it.

So, in our lives, and in the realm of relationships specifically, there are all kinds of thoughts and feelings and wants swirling around. Some of them are more important than others. These desires are strong currents in our lives, pushing us in directions that we may or may not want to go. This is part of what it means to go with the flow, to act without thinking. Whatever the reasons, we don't evaluate our wants much. We do what we want, not always in a rebellious sort of way, but usually in an autopilot sort of way. This causes a lot of frustration and disorder in our lives because, frankly, our autopilot is not that good. Sometimes we want and do what is good, but usually our natural course is one of unrealized intentions and regret.

But what if all your wants were written on a piece of paper and I could simply tell you which ones should be of primary and secondary priority? That would make things a lot easier for you. Of course, it may turn out that the primary things are not the things you currently want the most. What would you do then? It's not easy to change what you want. It's difficult to even explain why we want what we want. We just do. We have preferences and tastes and habits. We are sometimes blinded by temporary pleasures. So, how do you make yourself want something—want to wait for lasting pleasure, want to date the right guy, want to be

pure, want to do what God has been telling you to do lately?

PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

I was talking with some fraternity guys about this recently—you know, trying to help them get in touch with their feelings. Actually, we have been talking all semester about how we can become the kind of people who want what God wants. This conversation often makes us feel helpless before our natural desires and the cultural tide against what God wants. It took us nearly a semester to articulate that it is difficult to make yourself want something you don't want. (Don't laugh. You'll stifle our progress and we'll end up stuffing our emotions forever.) We also concluded that this is why we sin, because at least in that moment, we want to.

One day we were talking about how people who are in love do stuff they never would have imagined doing. For example, a guy we all know went to the mall recently to get something for his girlfriend. On top of that, he went to a store where, apparently, you build your own teddy bear. Somehow he talked a friend into going with him. So there they were, two guys trying to maintain coolness while assembling a teddy bear together.

I rode an undersized mountain bike from Fort Worth to Dallas (thirty-five miles) on a Texas summer day because my car was in the shop and I wanted to see my girlfriend. It took me four and half hours, and I almost collapsed from dehydration. Nobody in their right mind would do such a thing. But I was not in my right mind. I was in love with a girl named Debbie.

So the frat boys and I decided that if those two guys could build a teddy bear, and if I could brave the entrance and exit ramps of Dallas freeways on a mountain bike, then people's wants could be changed if they were in love.

As we talked about the relationship between love and want, we discovered that it is difficult to intentionally fall in love, even with God. I mean, I did not decide to love my wife. We just fell in love. It wasn't even glamorous. We met in a roller skating rink, in college. But there was something about the way she turned the corner during reverse skate that caught my attention. Something inexplicable that made me ask my friends who she was. Something that made me want to be with her. A few weeks later, I was on my spring break vacation and I couldn't stop thinking about her, the way she had smiled at me when we said goodbye on campus. I had to see her. I didn't know her phone number or how to get to her house, only

that she lived in Dallas. I left in the middle of the night and tracked down Debbie's number through my roommate, who knew her roommate. I finally found her and asked her out on a date.

I thought a concert would be a pretty cool date. The problem was that I didn't have any money. Being broke is what turned this romance into a comedy ... or maybe a tragedy. I figured, if my parents wanted to come, they would pay for everything. So that is how our first date went down, me and my parents picking up Debbie in my dad's company car to go to a concert. On top of that, I invited Debbie's roommate to come with us for some reason. You would have thought we were thirteen and going to the mall. The good part, I guess, is that I could only go up from there. So, having failed miserably at being cool, I opted for being weird. I'm convinced that Debbie kept seeing me simply because she was intrigued.

Love has a strange effect on people, which is why people who follow Jesus are hard to account for. They die to their desires and adopt an entirely different way of seeing things, like "It's better to give than receive,"³ "Do not store up treasures on earth,"⁴ "Do not worry about your life,"⁵ and "Consider others as more important than yourself."⁶



HOW TO FALL IN LOVE

I know I just said that you can't decide to fall in love, but I do think you can become the kind of person who is more likely to fall in love. Thinking about Jesus, it seems like people loved Him because they had an encounter with Him in which they experienced His love for them. So it seems that we could pursue Jesus with the intent of experiencing His love for us, and then His love would in fact transform our desires in ways that rules and willpower never could.

In my opinion, that's where many of us have gone wrong. We have reduced a relationship with God to a set of rules to keep and activities to do. I can tell you this from experience: the checklist of Christian activity does not love you, no matter how much you may love it. We don't experience God's love because we are lovable. Just the opposite: we experience His love because, knowing exactly how unlovable we are, He loves us more than we can imagine. This is the heart of the gospel.

That may sound too religious or simplistic, but that's because our understanding of "gospel" has become cliché. We tend to think of the gospel only in terms of the four or five points that we need to agree to in order to go to heaven when we die. But it's more than that—bigger, longer, broader, in the way a marriage far transcends the list of vows. So, how can we begin to think about the gospel more relationally, in a way that would help us experience God's love? Remember, experiencing God's love is how we come to want, and actually live, a life of purity and devotion to God.

For the sake of space and clarity, I am going to list some ideas I have found helpful. Please do not take the list to be a formula. Relationships do not have formulas, only discernible patterns or rhythms in how we relate—a dance, not operating instructions.

We were created for relationship. When God said, "Let us make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness,"⁷⁷ I think he was primarily talking about community. Think about the Trinity for a moment. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are always deflecting glory to one another and serving each other. It is a community of mutual submission and love. Wouldn't you like to have a group of friends like that, always trying to give each other credit and always serving the desires of one another in love? This is what God wanted for us: that we could experience community like the members of the Trinity have community. This kind of trinitarian community would, of course, be possible only for people who were satisfied and secure in their relationship with God.

We are isolated because of sin. Sin is our reality. We love it and hate it, and we hate that we love it. We readily admit that we are sinners, but we try to hide specific sins. Sin, personified, has been with us longer than anyone else in our life. We literally don't know how to live without it, can't even imagine that. And even though we are all in this together, we try to hide it as if we are doing just fine. But we aren't fine. We are frustrated and often lonely. Trinitarian community feels like a far-off land. But we still have our dignity.

Jesus exposes our sin. The encounters I mentioned—the ones where people fall in love with Jesus—usually involve a moment in which the persons find out that Jesus knows their deepest darkest secrets. He knows they are afraid, adulterous, prideful, materialistic, ashamed. He does not harp on people’s immorality in these situations, but He does want them to know that He knows everything about them. That’s what meaningful relationships are all about. Intimate knowledge.

Jesus forgives our sin. In the case of people who do not think they need to be forgiven of very much—that they are plenty lovable—those people do not really experience God’s love for them. They are generally too preoccupied with loving themselves. But in the case of those who understand the magnitude of the forgiveness they need, these are the people who fall in love with Jesus. They never imagined that He would love them as they are, no strings attached. But when He did, they were overcome with love. It plays out like John said: “We love God because he first loved us.”⁸

Jesus restores our relationships. Once God’s love is poured out in our hearts, we are free to love others as they are, no strings attached. We find ourselves closer and closer to the kind of relationships for which we were created.

We are here on purpose. Jesus prayed that we would “be brought to complete unity to let the world know that God sent him and has loved us even as He have loved Jesus.”⁹ Our mission to tell the world about Jesus is not programmatic but rather is simply an expression of what a God-centered, human-shaped-void-filling community would do.

Community. Intimacy. Forgiveness. Mission. This is only a glimpse of the good news about Jesus. But it’s enough to see how overtly relational the gospel is. The Christian life is not a performance or an isolated effort.

Living a solitary life reflects a distorted reality. What’s more, it rarely produces the kind of love-driven desire that we have been talking about. In a “just me and God” relationship, the effects of a depraved character are often difficult to grasp. By contrast, in honest and below-the-surface relationships with other people, the effects of sin are evident. Grace stops feeling so cheap as we witness the real consequences brought about by our selfish ambitions. To think other people unnecessary in our relationship with God is shortsighted at best and a different gospel at worst.

COMMUNAL LIFE

So much of what this book has to say comes down to your relationship with God. Do you want what He wants? Do you trust Him? Do you want His love more than anything else? These are the primary questions. And I am saying that you will not be able to discover the true answers to these questions apart from community—a group of people who are committed to following Christ together, putting on display the kind of love God has poured out into our hearts. We need each other to experience God. There is much to say about community, but again for the sake of space and clarity, I’d like to offer a few things that I believe will help you experience God’s love and want to do the hard work of marriage.



Honesty is the most essential aspect of a relationship. Not common interests or love.

We can only know each other to the degree that we are honest with each other. Dishonesty is usually our attempt to manipulate others and spin perception. At the very point where what I think and what I say I think differ, you can only relate to a fake version of me—even if the fake me is just the real me, slightly twisted. True relationship is suddenly off the table. I'm not saying that honesty is the cure-all, but I am saying that this is one thing that will go a long way toward meaningful relationships.

Confession is personal but not private. Want to know why it's so hard to overcome sin? It's because we don't tell people about it. Look what John says:

This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.¹⁰

The thing that sticks out to me is the fact that Jesus cleanses us from sin while we are in the light, which implies that we have sin while we are in the light. How does that work? How can I be in the light and yet have sin? I have always assumed that walking in the light means having some sort of sinless purity about me. I mean, John says that God is light. But then he says that if I say I have attained this sinless purity, I am a liar. It's a tough spot. It seems that "light" is better interpreted as "truth" or "honesty."

God is up-front, totally honest. He doesn't shade things or neglect our relationship. Fellowship with God and with each other means we reciprocate this kind of honesty. Confession is not a spiritual additive, something you can get by without. It is the kind of honesty and truth that makes relationship possible. Jesus is willing and able to cleanse us and restore our relationships if we will just get our sin—the real us—in the light. If we do not talk about our sin, then we are liars in our actual lives, regardless of what we know or say.

We always need to hear the gospel.

Community does not fix our brokenness. Actually, it magnifies our brokenness. Close relationships bring out the worst in people. Ask anyone who is married. Our tendency is to withdraw from one another when those things are exposed. But that is not the gospel. The gospel is God moving toward us while we are running in the opposite direction. God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Ultimately we all need acceptance and forgiveness from God, but it's sobering to realize how often He chooses to express those things through each of us. It makes a privatized faith highly unlikely. I need the people in my community, broken as they are, and at the same time they need me, broken as I am. Helpless as we are, we tell each other the good news about Jesus, and in Him we find life.

I realize that this is not the typical advice that people offer for growing in your relationship with God—things like Bible reading and prayer and worship. I wholeheartedly believe that you need to do those things. But I also think that you already knew that. Doing stuff for God is easy. Wanting to do stuff for God is love.

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¹ Don Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts On Christian Spirituality* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2003), p. 63.

² C. S. Lewis, "First and Second Things" in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 278-81.

³ Acts 20:35

⁴ Matthew 6:19

⁵ Luke 12:22

⁶ Philippians 2:3

⁷ Genesis 1:26

⁸ 1 John 4:19

⁹ John 17:23

¹⁰ 1 John 1:5-10