

Introduction

When it comes to sex, and our sexuality, and gender and we are facing a very complicated group of interrelated issues. And as we've seen over the last several weeks our views about these things

- are typically based on **moral intuitions**.
- And these moral intuitions reside at a deeper level than our heads, our minds, our intellect...they reside in our hearts, in our guts, in our instincts.

And over the recent decades in diverse fields of study, from philosophy to neurobiology, from psychology to theology, and from marketing to sociology...a fundamental consensus has emerged that the **way we get our moral intuitions is through story**.

And there are **three fundamental stories** our society tells that form our sense of what's right and what's wrong when it comes to sex and gender.

Two weeks ago we looked at the stories our society tells so well about **identity**. That in our age of authenticity, one of the most important things in life is to find your deepest dreams and desires and to bring those out to the world. And our sexual desires are an essential part of that. They are both a marker of our true self, and a primary way of expressing our true self.¹ So you've got to be true to yourself, no matter what others say. And if someone puts pressure on you to change that about yourself, they are oppressing you, they are threatening your health, your flourishing, your core personal identity.

Last week we looked at the story shaped view of **freedom** in our society today. And this particular view of freedom is about having the ability to be who we want, do what we want, and live however we want. Applied to sexuality, this produces three basic rules: (1) Do what you want as long as it's consensual. (2) Do what you want as long as you don't hurt anyone. and (3) Don't tell anyone else their life choices are wrong—because that is being judgmental.

And for both of the last two weeks, I talked about what is good in the story our society tells about identity and about freedom, and what is unhelpful, what is bad. And how the Christian story of identity and freedom is a better story.

Tonight we're coming to the final set of stories our culture tells that form the bedrock of our moral intuitions about sex and gender, and that is the story of **love**, true love, romantic love.

Transition: And to unmask our deep intuitions about love, romantic love, let's start in an unexpected place. Death row.

Romantic Love in Our Secular Age

In Norman Mailer's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Executioner's Song*—later made into an Academy Award winning movie—there is a murderer on death row. His name is Gary Gilmore. And he writes a letter to his girlfriend, who's also in prison. And he asks the question: "What is to become of us Nicole? I know you wonder. And the answer is simple: By love... we can become more than the situation."²

And that's the view of love that dominates our society today. Now don't get me wrong, "the human longing for true love has always been celebrated in song and story, but in our contemporary culture it has been magnified to an astonishing degree."³

Here in the West, in the long retreat of Christianity over the last several centuries,

- it's **love** that has risen to the **throne** once held by **God**.

Love, genuine love, has become the new god. And not just any old god, but the spitting image of the Christian god. In other words, **love** has come to be seen as

- all-good,
- unconditional,
- unchanging,
- selfless in showing concern for the wellbeing of loved ones,
- and our chief bulwark against suffering and loss.⁴
- It's love that gives us meaning and happiness.
- Love saves;
- It's love that explains, justifies, washes away, and defeats suffering and injustice.

In other words, in our Secular Age, **Christianity has declined, but faith has not.**

In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*, a book that sits at the intersection of psychology and philosophy, Ernest Becker, documents this aspect of Western society: "If you don't have a God in heaven... then you take what is nearest at hand and work out your problems on that."⁵

So our society has **not** lost faith... it **HAS** lost faith in the God of the Bible... but it still exercises faith,

- only now it's faith in love.

Just think about how the songs and the movies and the novels of our Secular Age are filled with the **power of love**, **in place of** the **power of God**.

Take three movies:

- The 2001 movie, *Shrek* (Academy Award Winner),
- The 2004 movie, *The Notebook* (not an Academy Award winner, but it has definitely gained a cult following).
- And the 2016 movie, *La La Land* (nominated for 11 Academy Awards, it won 6 of them),

Now what these movies **all have in common is the power of love.**

They all tell the story of **romantic love**, not God, but romantic love as the **strongest force** in the universe.

- In *La La Land* you can **chase your dreams**,
- in *The Notebook* you can **face Alzheimers**,
- and in *Shrek* you can even **marry an Ogre**.

All you need is true love, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No, all you need is love. Because true love “burns brightly and passionately, and then it just keeps on burning until death, and then it just keeps on burning after death” because love, true love is the strongest force in the universe.⁶

So over the last several centuries, with the spread of secularism, **“in the wasteland of Western idols, only love survives intact.”**⁷

- It’s in love we trust.
- Romantic love is the great gift that rescues.

As our society has lost belief in God, and we struggle to come to grips with our place in the universe, “how do we instill a sense of significance in our lives? One of the main ways is, again, what Ernest Becker, called, in *The Denial of Death*, he labeled this: “apocalyptic romance.” “We look to sex and romance to give us the transcendence and sense of meaning we used to get from faith in God.”⁸

- Find love, and you can escape your loneliness and insecurity.
- Fall in love, and life has meaning.
- When you’re in love, you’re transported beyond the messy imperfections of the everyday world into havens of peace and purity.
- It’s love that can change desperate situations.

This is what our movies, and books, and songs, and instagram, and snapchat, and magazines “calls us to keep on doing...to load all of the deepest needs of our hearts for significance and transcendence into romance and love.”⁹ **“Love has become the only truly universal religion in the West.”**¹⁰

Just think about that great movie that so many of us love, *The Princess Bride*. Think about how it “maintain[s] the fantasy that if we find our one true soul mate, everything wrong with us will be healed.”¹¹

Transition: How did this happen? How did love become the new God?¹²

Where Did Our View of Love Come From?

Well, its roots are definitely in Christianity; in the “confession that God is love and that God has saved the world out of love.”¹³

But while its roots are there in Christianity, something happened during the **High Middle Ages in France**. Around the **twelfth century**, a tradition began that was carried to Italy and Spain through music. It was the **songs** of the Troubadours. And these songs, they focused on

- “stories of chivalry,
- [the] idealization of women,
- and the uplifting ache of unconsummated desire.”¹⁴

And so this semi-Christianized view of love, the courtly love tradition, it flourished throughout medieval Europe. And it **had a good run for about six to seven hundred years.**

And **then** in the **late eighteenth** and **early nineteenth** centuries the way people viewed romantic love underwent **another transformation**. And this time it happened **not through music**, but through the **novel**. Suddenly you have these stories where people find their **meaning**, and their **vocation**, and their **fate**, and even their **salvation**—they find all of these wonderfully necessary things, they find them—when they fall in love.¹⁵

And so throughout the rise of secularism and the long, slow death of God in Western civilization over the last couple of centuries, while that’s been going on, we’ve been writing some incredible novels, these really great stories. And so many of them have been focused on romantic love. And these stories have been told so well that their particular views of romantic love have taken hold of the popular conscience and captured our imaginations.

Jane Austen, Walter Scott, the Brontës, Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Becket. The list goes on and on. Through their novels, novels like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering Heights*, over the course of the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century our Western society **began to embrace a new view of life energized by a new view of romantic love.**

Now I'm obviously simplifying a very complex thing. I mean think about what all was going on during this same period of time.

- “The means of production were being revolutionized,
- [literacy was growing]
- social hierarchy and the status of women were changing,
- [the middle class was growing,]
- science was developing new ideas of determinism,
- and God, for many [people], was disappearing.”

And in the midst of this, you have these love stories, where **individuals are filled with worth and potential**. And you have these wonderful **plots** focused on love and “the lover and the beloved, no matter who they are,” they’re the stars of the stories, and so the deep formation of these love stories on our collective psyche develops in us this intuition that “anyone who can fall in love can be a star... [can be] one of the elect.”¹⁶

So what happened is that during the late 1700s and the 1800s, as the **West was losing its faith in God, novels began to form people in the religion of romantic love**.

Look at it this way, way back in the early days of the Greco-Roman empire, **love was once a goddess**, and in the nineteenth century it came again to have the force of deity.¹⁷ And so **love increasingly filled the vacuum left by the retreat of Christianity**.

And this carries on until roughly the 1930s when the power of the **novel** to shape our imaginations and moral intuitions, it began to be **replaced** by radio, advertising, movies, and ultimately the internet.¹⁸

Transition: Now there is so much **good** in this story, this view of love. But there’s also some things going on here that are **not good**. And before we go into it, **I want to press pause**. Let’s set this discussion of “love” aside for a moment and let’s think about an entirely different topic.

Let’s learn a particular way of looking at culture, a way of evaluating cultures that Scripture teaches us. (It’s actually what I’ve been doing over the last two weeks, but this week I want to describe for you the framework behind my way of thinking about culture.) So we’re going to pull back and talk about one particular aspect of a Biblical theology of culture, and then we’ll use that approach to evaluate our society’s view of love.

The Gospel as Subversive Fulfillment

If you have a Bible, turn to **Isaiah c11vv1–10**. **[Read it.]**

So here we have the Christian vision of a “future free from violence, and bias, and war. A future where we live on this earth with genuine security, and safety. No threats of violence. No injustice. No vulnerability. Life here, on this earth, in a “world set free both from human injustice and from ‘natural’ violence. This is not simply a hope **beyond** the world. It is a hope **for** the world.”¹⁹

It’s a foundational vision, at the center of Christianity, that God will make everything right. That one day there will be—you can feel it in this passage—“a cosmic sigh of relief.” We hear it from the lambs and the wolves. And it’s “what we’ve [all] been waiting for”²⁰ in this world of ours that’s “grown old in sophistication, [and] cynicism, and violence.”²¹

I want to draw your attention, in particular, to **v10**, *“In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations **inquire** and his resting place shall be glorious.”*

Jesus is the desire of the nations. He is what the nations of the world have longed for. Peace, justice, freedom, a voice and a vote which will count, health, and around and above all of those, love, and real satisfaction for the hungers of the heart, a hunger which no amount of money, fine houses, fast cars, luxury vacations or love affairs will ever begin to reach.

And in **v10**, we see all of the **nations streaming to King Jesus**. Now, they are not bowing down before a power, but before a person, God himself, a leader of human beings **who is the fulfillment of their story**.

And notice it says, *“of him shall the nations **inquire**.”* **And pay close attention to what it is that the nations are inquiring about?**

They are inquiring of Jesus. Jesus is what they are asking about. **Jesus is what they’ve always desired.**

This is what the last phrase is telling us. “Whoever comes to the place of rest has reached the goal, and [now, they] can...live.” They can truly live.²²

Whenever we are talking with someone about any one of the many, massive complicated issues regarding sexuality and gender today, we must always remember that Jesus Christ alone is the bread of life. He **is** the fulfillment of their deep desires.

The gospel really and truly does fulfill our culture’s deepest aspirations.

And so part of what I’ve been doing in these three sessions focused on the stories our culture is telling regarding identity, and freedom, and now love...part of the reason I’ve approached these

issues in the way I have is because **we need to learn to recognize the deep and long stories our culture is telling so that** we can, in the words of the New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, so that we can learn

- how to “tell **the story of our world**, our increasingly neo-pagan society,
- in terms of the long history of promises we have clung onto and pledges we have made and broken.

[And] we should be prepared to think it all [the way] through so we can tell the story that” the person we are talking with **knows that we’re telling “their** story, the one they always knew they wanted to hear.

And we have to tell it so that...it ends with Jesus,

- not artificially or like a conjuror pulling a rabbit out of a hat,

but so that he appears as what and who he truly is:

- the truly human one,
- the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,
- the living bread through whom all our hungers are satisfied.”²³

So the **gospel, you see, really is everyone’s fulfillment.**

But there’s more.

The better story of the Gospel is *not merely fulfillment*—it’s also **subversion**. The way the Christian story relates to cultures is that **it’s a subversive fulfillment** of the deep stories in any given culture.

This phrase—**subversive fulfillment**—it’s a label developed by the British theologian Daniel Strange. His speciality is in the area of Christianity’s relationship to other religions. And so to put the issue in his own words:

“Non-Christian religions [or non-Christian worldviews] are essentially an idolatrous refashioning of divine revelation, which are antithetical and yet parasitic on Christian truth, and of which the gospel of Jesus Christ is this ‘subversive fulfillment.’”²⁴

And the really important insight here is that the **gospel fulfills the deepest aspirations of the world, but “only by contradicting the distorted and idolatrous means** the world adopts to satisfy them.”²⁵

Transition: So now let’s go back to the story our society is telling about love, the story of romantic love, let’s see how the Christian vision both fulfills and subverts it.

The Good in Our Society's Story of Love

And to begin with, let's recognize that the Bible affirms the view that "love is indeed the greatest of great things."²⁶ It is a uniquely **powerful** force that is **fundamental** to our lives.

For example, **John 3:16**. "*For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son.*" Clearly love is central to the Christian story.

And furthermore, let's recognize the importance and power of romantic love. Take, for example, the remarkable series of poems in the Bible that we call the **Song of Songs**, or the **Song of Solomon**.

If you have a Bible, please find this book. **Song of Solomon c1v2**.

Right at the beginning of this book we read: "*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine.*" Passionate, romantic love—it tastes better than wine, it's more intoxicating than wine. It's a beautiful and breath-taking state that grips us and takes hold of us.

Whether it's *Pride and Prejudice* or *Shrek* or *The Princess Bride*, our society's got it right on this point. Romantic love is "an extraordinary psychological state that launched the Trojan war, inspired much of the world's best (and worst) music and literature, and [has given so many people]...the most perfect days of [their] lives."²⁷

Now go to the last chapter of the **Song of Solomon, c8**.

Here we find some of the most beautiful words in all of the world's literature. Look at **v6**. "*Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love, all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.*"

Ah! Can you hear it? Romantic love is so strong, "even if all the elements conspired together, and even if death joined the conspiracy...their power would bow before the power of love."²⁸ And furthermore, generally speaking, romantic love is a gift from God. "*Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD.*"

And this helps us to see something that's good about the sexual revolution. Through the sexual revolution, God has helped our society make some necessary adjustments in our view of sex.

The Sexual Revolution Corrected Some of the Church's Mistakes

You see, the church has, unfortunately, earned its reputation for being the enemy of sex. And how we got that reputation is a long story, that in some ways is understandable and in some ways is shameful.²⁹

The bare outline of it goes like this.

Until about 500 years ago, “in the West, sexual existence [had become] divided into two spheres:

- the higher sphere of the celibate clergy and religious orders,
- and the lower sphere of the ordinary population, where” people had sex in order to make babies.

But even then, be careful. Because married sex was guarded by a whole bunch of rules, all these “prohibitions against pleasure and the constant teaching that there was a ‘more perfect’ path that avoided sex altogether.”

- And so “the church” **for about a thousand years** “**promoted a culture that denigrated sexual life.**”
- Here in the West, the “church’s official theology,” when it came to sex, was “geared toward the values” of celibacy.
- And this was exemplified in the monks, and nuns, and priests, and bishops.³⁰

So, in the Catholic church for many centuries, the teaching about sex was that if you weren’t going to live the higher calling of celibacy, if you were going to get married and have sex, then you need to know that pure and good sex was disciplined “by reason” and was for the purpose of procreation—making babies. And so in the popular culture, the church cultivated **guilt about enjoying sex.**³¹

And until just one “generation ago, procreation was still thought to be the **primary** and [if not] the **only** fully justifying reason for sex.”³²

- “Medieval Catholic teachings” were very critical of sexual pleasure,
- even among married couples in the process of procreating.
- The only proper goal of sex was pregnancy.³³

But don’t get me wrong. It wasn’t just the Catholics. In the Protestant church we see a similar denigration—for different reasons, but a denigration of sex all the same. For example, “in the Victorian era, in both England and America,” for Protestants sex was meant to **bond** the couple. Sex was healthy, and...[so] pleasure was attached to it, but pleasure shouldn’t be its main object.”³⁴

Now I’m dwelling on this for two reasons: **One**, we need to know that **Christians bear heavy responsibility** for the counter-reaction of the sexual revolution.³⁵ And **two**, as I pointed out last week, there is **much good in the** sexual revolution. And **three very important gifts** that the sexual revolution have given us, gifts for which Christians should be thankful, gifts that are deeply Biblical are:

1. the affirmation of sensuality,
2. the equality of the sexes, the idea that men and women come together as true partners,
3. and (a third issue that is profoundly biblical, but I haven't taken the time to talk about,) is the "overcoming of the divisions between mind and body, reason and feeling."³⁶

Transition: So it is important that we learn to recognize the sexual revolution and the elevation of erotic love is something that is very complex. Much of what drove the sexual revolution was deeply rooted in Christianity. We cannot treat it "simply as an outbreak of hedonism."³⁷ So in keeping with the gifts of the sexual revolution, and the stories our culture are telling about romantic love, we need to affirm that

- Erotic love is a powerful force,
- and it is of the very essence of life as humans,
- and it can be from God.

And yet...there is more to the story. Remember **Isaiah 11:10**.

The Gospel is a Subversive Fulfillment of the Story Our Society Tells of Love

"In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire and his resting place shall be glorious."

Remember what we're seeing here. We're seeing that the **gospel fulfills the deepest aspirations of the world, but "only by contradicting the distorted and idolatrous means** the world adopts to satisfy them."³⁸

And so while there is so much good going on in the story our society is telling about romantic love, there is also a part of this story that doesn't work.

1. For example, **as powerful as romantic love is, it is still fickle**. It tends to ebb and flow. C. S. Lewis so perceptively wrote about this. He said, that while "**being in love is a good thing...it is not the best thing**. There are many things below it, but there are also things above it. You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is a feeling...[And] no feeling can be relied on to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all. Knowledge can last, principles can last, habits can last; but feelings come and go." And yet, "ceasing to be 'in love'" does not have "to mean ceasing to love."³⁹ For all of its wonderful power, romantic love is too fickle to base your whole life on it.
2. Second, **by itself, romantic love can become dangerously selfish**. Whenever lovers focus on each other to the exclusion of the rest of Creation and the Creator, their relationship will

inevitably dissolve into a self-centered relationship. The love relationship will inevitably morph into “a boomerang for self-satisfaction.”⁴⁰

- ‘I love you’ comes to mean ‘you meet my needs.’
- ‘I love you’ comes to mean ‘you scratch my itch.’

And of course “that kind of love...is destined for tragedy, because it turns the person I love into a means for...my own gratification.” It’s a form of **self-idolatry**, it says that the person I love exists to satisfy me.⁴¹ Now, instead of lovers, you have a pair of parasites trying to feed off of one another.⁴²

But the story the Bible tells about romantic love not only celebrates and rejoices in it, it also handles the fickleness and the selfishness inherent in this powerful gift.

In the story the Bible tells, just like in the story our society is telling, being in love can bring out the best in us; it can make us generous and tender, and self-forgetful.

But the Bible helps us to understand that when this happens, what’s happening is that we’re getting a “new vision of one other human being, an *insight* into his or her ‘eternal identity.’ To the rest of the world, such a vision may seem a delusion. ‘She’s moonstruck,’ we say of someone in love, or ‘Love is blind.’ As Shakespeare said in *The Tempest*, about the person who has fallen into love, “They have changed eyes.”⁴³

But what’s happening is that for just a moment, “when Cupid’s golden arrow hits your heart, and, in an instant, the world around you is transformed. You crave union with your beloved. You want, somehow, to crawl into each other.”⁴⁴ In that moment, you have the God-given “ability to see the best in one other person, to ignore or forgive flaws, to bask in endless fascination. That state” is “a foretaste of how we will one day view every resurrected person.” And it’s a glimpse into “how God now views” everyone of us.⁴⁵

In this sense, **“romantic love does not distort [our] vision...[it] corrects it**, in a very narrow range. The Bible uses explicit romantic images to describe God’s love for us: what we feel in passing for one person, God feels eternally for” all his sons and daughters. “If we receive romantic love not as an end in itself but as God’s gift, a shining grace, it can become like a shaft of light beckoning us toward what we will someday experience more fully as resurrected beings.”⁴⁶

“I cannot love every person in my neighborhood, let alone every person on the planet, in the way I love my wife. I have neither the capacity nor the desire. [But] some day, perhaps, I will.”⁴⁷

C. S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Four Loves*. He describes the amazing gift of romantic love, its awesome power. Here are his words:

In one high bound it has overleaped the massive wall of our selfhood; it has made appetite itself altruistic, tossed personal happiness aside as a triviality and planted the interest of another in the centre of our being. Spontaneously and without effort we have fulfilled the law (towards one person) by loving our neighbour as ourselves. It is an image, a foretaste, of what we must become to all if Love Himself rules in us without a rival. It is even (well used) a preparation for that.⁴⁸

Now here's a subtle but serious difference between the Christian vision of romantic love and the vision we get from our Secular Age.

And it's a subtlety that is so well displayed in Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*. (I learned this from an essay by Marti Eads, a great professor of English at EMU.)

In *Jayber Crow* we see romantic longing as a **starting point**, not an end point. As a starting point it **can** lead to a far more encompassing human love, and it can even lead to salvation itself. *Jayber Crow* is a theology of romantic love as suffering **unto** salvation.⁴⁹ It's a passion narrative.

So that's a **third way** that our society's approach to love is distorted and idolatrous.

- It doesn't recognize God as the true **end** of romantic love.
- Our Secular Age is staring at the sign, instead of looking to where the sign is pointing.
- Romantic love is a great gift to be received, but it is also a sign pointing us toward God.

And **fourth**, a fourth flaw in our society's view of love is our society has cut off romantic love from its **source**.

What I mean is that in our Secular Age **it's love that carries the burden** of achieving what, in the Christian story, only God can achieve. We've stopped believing in the Christian God, but we've kept all of our expectations for the Christian God and just loaded them onto love. Remember, at the beginning of tonight I said that **love, genuine love, has become the new god**. And not just any old god, but the spitting image of the Christian god.

This is a fascinating thing that's happened.

The key issue here can be neatly expressed in a clever word play that I'm going to steal from a guy by the name of Peter Leithart.⁵⁰

In the story our Secular Age is telling about love,

- the Christian confession of faith is that the **God of love saves us**,
- but this has been replaced by the current confession of faith, that **love saves us**.

And so this is a shift from

- the Christian confession of faith that “God is love”
- to the current confession of faith that “Love is God.”

And we can see this when we contrast *Beauty and the Beast* with C.S. Lewis’ version of the same story in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Remember, in *Beauty and the Beast*, **it’s Belle’s love that has the power to break the spell and transform the beast** back into a man. And this is a prime example of the story our society tells about **love—in and of itself, it can save us**.

- It has the power to redeem a beast and make him a prince.
- And it has the power to redeem an extramarital affair. If there’s true love, then it can be right.
- It has the power to redeem a couple’s choice to co-habitate.
- It has the power to make same-sex marriage good and true.

Now **compare that story**, and the vision it’s giving us, compare it to the way C. S. Lewis tells this same myth in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

The scene starts with Eustace, a rotten boy, who has come upon a large fortune, and falls asleep with his treasure. When he awakes, Eustace is no longer a boy but a dragon—the outward manifestation of his inner greed and selfishness. (Now, up to this point, it’s the same basic idea as the one in *Beauty and the Beast*.)

So Eustice has become a beast. And he tries to strip the dragon skin off with his dragon claws, but no matter how hard he tries, there is just more dragon skin underneath. And then what happens?

Well, in mercy and compassion, Aslan arrives (God), and he leads the dragoned Eustace to a well at the center of a garden. Eustace desperately wants to get in. But before he can get in, Aslan says...I’ll read it... Then Aslan said, “You will have to let me undress you.” And Eustace, who at this point in the book, is telling what happened to his friend, Edmund, and so Eustace tells Edmund:

I was afraid of his claws...but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The

only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know – if you’ve ever picked the scab off a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away.

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Edmund.

“Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off — just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt — and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me — I didn’t like that much for I was very tender — and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I’d turned into a boy again. . . . [And] after a bit the lion took me out and dressed me **in new clothes**.⁵¹

Okay, so compare this to *Beauty and the Beast*, and you can see the important difference in how our society has come to envision redemption through love in contrast to how Christianity depicts redemption. And the Christian story is better. Because it’s truer: Romantic love cannot redeem or restore us. We’re expecting too much from it.

We’ve **cut it off from its source and from its end**. Romantic love can point us down the path, it can point us to God. But it is God’s love—his sometimes painful, sometimes brutal love—this is the only force on earth that can save and restore us—that can turn a beast into a prince.

Conclusion

So to wrap this up. Whether it’s *Beauty and the Beast*, or *Cinderella*, or *The Little Mermaid*, or more adult faire like *The Notebook* our society is telling these amazing stories that show us

- true love as the most powerful force in the universe,
- it’s the force that has the power to overcome suffering and disappointment.

Through it we can conquer any obstacle,

- justify any action,
- raise the dead,
- and transform beasts into human beings.

But this is expecting far too much from love. And this may come as a surprise to some of us, but when **Jesus** talked about love,

- he **never presented love as the silver bullet** solution, the all-purpose solution to life's problems.
- He never suggested that human beings can be saved through love.

Remember, what we've seen tonight is that making love into God is something our Secular Age has done over the last couple of hundred years. And this new religion, the religion of love, is making us "overdependent on being in love," so that "without a romantic relationship of some kind, even the wrong kind...[our] lives feel meaningless."⁵²

And this is doing significant damage to human flourishing. It's filling our relationships with false expectations and so it's sabotaging them from the start. Promises are being made that cannot be kept. When **love carries the burden** of achieving what, in the Christian story, only God can achieve. We experience all kinds of unfortunate consequences.

Making an idol out of love leaves us susceptible to allowing a "lover to exploit and abuse you, or it may cause terrible blindness to the pathologies in...[a] relationship. An idolatrous attachment can lead you to break any promise, rationalize any indiscretion, or betray and any other allegiance, in order to hold on to it. It may drive you to violate all good and proper boundaries. To practice idolatry is to be a slave." And we live in a culture that makes it so easy "to mistake love for God."⁵³

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the subversive fulfillment of this story. And beginning next week our attention will shift to the Christian vision of sexuality. And we'll hear the better story.

Resource to Recommend to the Church at the End of this Session

Grant, Jonathan. *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015.

And if you're interested in digging deeper into this whole issue:

Simon May. *Love: A History*. Yale University Press, 2011.

Simon May. *Love: A New Understanding of an Ancient Emotion*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Robert M. Polhemus. *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce*. The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Robert M. Polhemus. *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence*. The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

- ¹ Philip Turner, "The Episcopalian Preference," *First Things*, November 2003: 31.
- ² Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song* (New York: Vintage Books, [1979] 1998), 473.
- ³ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Viking, 2009), 22.
- ⁴ Simon May, "Rethinking Our Fascination with Love," Author Article, *Yale Books* (blog), April 27, 2011, <https://yalebooksblog.co.uk/2011/04/27/author-article-by-simon-may-rethinking-our-fascination-with-love/>.
- ⁵ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 162.
- ⁶ Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 124.
- ⁷ Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 4.
- ⁸ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 28, summarizing Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).
- ⁹ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 29.
- ¹⁰ May, "Rethinking Our Fascination with Love."
- ¹¹ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 29.
- ¹² "Cultures create their own understandings of psychological phenomena, but many of those phenomena will occur regardless of what people think about them." Romantic love happens, but the way we think of it is socially constructed. E.g., the way we think of "death is socially constructed by every culture, but bodies die without consulting those constructions" (Haidt, *Happiness*, 123).
- ¹³ Peter Leithart, *Great Mystery: Fourteen Wedding Sermons* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2006), xi. For the long history of love in Western Civilization see May, *Love*.
- ¹⁴ Haidt, *Happiness*, 123.
- ¹⁵ Robert Polhemus develops this view in his book, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). He first introduced the concept that the British novel was a crucial means for imagining forms of faith to augment or substitute for orthodox religious visions in *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- ¹⁶ Polhemus, *Erotic Faith*, 4.
- ¹⁷ Polhemus, *Erotic Faith*, 5.
- ¹⁸ "People in Western nations are raised on" this view of romantic love. "And it acts as an ideal that [we]...unconsciously carry with [us]...even if [we]...scoff at it. And it's gone way beyond the West. "It's not just Hollywood that perpetrates" this view of life and love; Bollywood, the Indian film industry, is filled this take on life (Haidt, *Happiness*, 124).

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1044.

²⁰ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1044.

²¹ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 284.

²² Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, [1980] 1991), 482.

²³ N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two: Chapters 13–28* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 26.

²⁴ Daniel Strange in *Only One Way?: Three Christian Responses to the Uniqueness of Christ in a Religiously Pluralist World*, Gavin D’Costa, Paul Knitter, and Daniel Strange (London: SCM Press, 2011), 93. See also, Daniel Strange, *For Their Rock is Not as Our Rock’: An Evangelical Theology of Religions* (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2014).

²⁵ Timothy Keller, “A Missionary Encounter Today?,” February 2017.

²⁶ May, “Rethinking Our Fascination with Love.”

²⁷ Haidt, *Happiness*, 123.

²⁸ Peter Leithart, *Great Mystery*, 51.

²⁹ Yancey, *Rumors of Another World: What on Earth are We Missing?*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 79.

³⁰ Ephraim Radner, *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality, and the Shape of Human Life* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 88–9. For the definitive account of the origins of this history see, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, [1988] 2008); See also, Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). For a succinct summary of these academic works, see Kyle Harper, “The First Sexual Revolution: How Christianity Transformed the Ancient World,” in *First Things* (January 2018). E.g., where Harper roots latent Christian anti-erotic views in Paul’s concession that marriage is permissible only since it is a legitimate safeguard against *porneia* amidst the lures of the city. And from this textual root, “the possibility of full-blown Encratism stalked much of early Christian history...In the second century, Clement of Alexandria held fast to the view that within marriage, only sex solely for the purpose of procreation was permissible. [And it was not until the Jovinianist controversy was extinguished in the late fourth century, and Augustine’s tour de force ‘Of the Good of Marriage’ was written...[that it became] completely clear within Christianity that marriage could be a genuine good and not merely some kind of lesser evil.”

³¹ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Using Augustine in Contemporary Sexual Ethics: A Response to Gilbert Meilaender,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29:1 (Spring, 2001), 27. In a footnote to this statement, Cahill refers the reader to Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1994).

³² Cahill, “Using Augustine in Contemporary Sexual Ethics, 27.”

³³ Charles Taylor, "Sex and Christianity: How Has the Moral Landscape Changed?," *Commonweal* 134 (2007): 12–18.

³⁴ Taylor, "Sex and Christianity."

³⁵ And that counter-revolution, it starts "at the turn of the twentieth century...For thinkers like Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis, and Edward Carpenter, sexual [pleasure]...was either [in and of] itself good, or at least seen as a virtually unstoppable force. This fed into a counterculture, some strands of which saw sexuality as a form of Dionysian release from discipline and repression. Around the beginning of the century, all this came together with new social conditions, mainly in cities, where young people could pair off without supervision. In the 1920s young people, particularly women, enjoyed a new kind of freedom, which took the form of a sensuality unconnected to marriage or procreation. This new freedom involved, first, a hesitant lifting of the age-old denigration of sensuality (at least in white, middle-class circles) and, second a hesitant affirmation of women's desire (often denied in the high-Victorian period), and of their right to seek pleasure as well. Such pleasure was, of course, still fraught with danger, since women would bear the brunt of any negative consequences of pregnancy." "If we fast-forward to the 1960s, we have to take account of new social factors: women in the work force, the contraceptive revolution, and others." "The main strands of" the sexual revolution included "a supposedly worldly-wise hedonism, the one associated with *Playboy*. But the main ones associated with the movements of students and young people were fourfold: (1) the rehabilitation, continued from the 1920s, of sensuality as a good in itself; (2) the continued affirmation of the equality of the sexes, and in particular the expression of a new ideal in which men and women come together as partners freed of their gender roles; (3) a widespread sense of Dionysian, even 'transgressive' sex as liberating; and (4) a new conception of one's sexuality as an essential part of one's identity., which not only gave an additional meaning to sexual liberation, but also became the basis for gay liberation and the emancipation of a whole host of previously condemned forms of sexual life. The sexual revolution, then, was moved by a complex of moral ideas in which discovering one's authentic identity and demanding that it be recognized was connected to the goal of equality, the rehabilitation of the body and sensuality, and the overcoming of the divisions between mind and body, reason and feeling. We cannot treat it simply as an outbreak of hedonism." (Taylor, "Sex and Christianity").

³⁶ Taylor, "Sex and Christianity," ??.

³⁷ Taylor, "Sex and Christianity," ??.

³⁸ Timothy Keller, "A Missionary Encounter Today?," February 2017.

³⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001 [1952]), 108.

⁴⁰ Dan Claire, "Marriage in the Beginning," a sermon preached on May 5, 2013 at The Church of the Resurrection, Washington, D.C.. Accessed online.

⁴¹ Leithart, *Great Mystery*, 85.

⁴² Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 125.

⁴³ Yancey, *Rumors*, 89. Citing Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I:2.

⁴⁴ Haidt, *Happiness*, 125.

⁴⁵ Yancey, *Rumors*, 89.

⁴⁶ Yancey, *Rumors*, 90.

⁴⁷ Yancey, *Rumors*, 90.

⁴⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), 130–31.

⁴⁹ Martha Eads, “Suffering Unto Salvation in Wendell Berry’s *Jayber Crow*,” *The Cresset* 75, no. 1 (Michaelmas 2011): 14–19.

⁵⁰ Leithart, *Great Mystery*, xii.

⁵¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: Grafton, [1955] 2002), 86–87.

⁵² Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 23.

⁵³ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 23–24.