

“How to Fan the Flames of Love”

(Get Ready for the Bedroom)

Song of Solomon 1:15 – 2:7

I. Praise your partner. 1:15 – 2:2

1. Admire their attractiveness. 1:15-16
2. Acknowledge their thoughtfulness. 1:17
3. Affirm their uniqueness. 2:1-2

II. Proclaim their provision. 2:3

1. Tell others how they protect you.
2. Tell others how they please you.

III. Prepare for passion. 2:4-7

1. Make love in the right place. 2:4
2. Make love with the right commitment.
3. Make love in the right way. 2:5-6
4. Make love at the right time. 2:7

“How to Fan the Flames of Love”

(Song of Solomon 1:15 – 2:7)

Introduction

1. Reuters’ News Service reported on June 6, 2000:

Romance and marriage are out while casual sex and low-commitment relationships are in among young Americans, researchers said.

A study by Rutgers University's National Marriage Project found that young men and women in their twenties, unlike generations before them, aren't interested in finding marriage partners when they date.

Instead, they are more concerned with "Sex Without Strings, Relationships Without Rings."

"Today's singles scene is not oriented toward marriage, nor is it dedicated to romantic love as it has been in the past," said David Popenoe, co-director of the National Marriage Project and a sociology professor at Rutgers in New Jersey.

To be sure, young Americans today did not invent the concept of "free love," such as existed during the 1960s. The difference is that young people today are more concerned with economic and sexual self-gratification than past generations.

Young people in America today are more concerned with having fun and making money and less focused on forming lasting relationships that lead to marriage and raising a family.

The report said that young Americans:

- Favor living together as a try-out for marriage or as an alternative to marriage;
- Believe sex is for fun and has no strings attached;
- Have a fear of divorce; and
- See marriage (and divorce) as a potential economic liability.

Oddly, however, most of the young men and women who participated in the study expected some day to meet and marry somebody who fulfilled their emotional and spiritual needs.

The problem, researchers said, is that their current mercenary mating habits do not easily lead to the fulfillment of that goal.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead said the men and women in the study, because of the high incidence of divorce among their parents, did not count on having lasting relationships with each other. Instead, they focused more on themselves.

While the men and women in the study shared similar mating habits and goals in their early twenties, as the late twenties approached women much more than men wanted a committed relationship.

But women also became more disenchanted with the pool of prospective partners and the likelihood of finding a mate.

Whitehead said, “We may be seeing a massive change that would mean that romantic love and courtship might be giving way to something altogether new. Or we may be in a period of cultural cluelessness.”

2. What a tragic, but realistic picture of the mating and marriage scene today. However, Iris Krasnow of the Washington Post (Sept. 11, 2000) helps put all of this in perspective with her commentary on the HBO blockbuster “Sex and the City.” In an article entitled “Being Single, Seeing Double” she writes:

“I’m looking at the recent Time magazine cover that pictures the four buffed stars of HBO’s “Sex and the City,” women who talk dirtier and have more sex than anyone I have ever met. Front and center is Sarah Jessica Parker, with her tumbles of long locks, perfectly highlighted and curled, falling to breasts encased in a white strapless gown. Her lips are glossed into an iridescent purple pout; the look in her cat-green eyes says, “Take me now.”

Decked for an evening of prowling, these women appear to be appropriate cover art for an article titled “How to Snag a Mate.” Instead the “Sex and the City” sirens are a tease for a story on “Who Needs a Husband?,” which points to a growing trend defined this way: “More women are saying no to marriage and embracing the single life. Are They Happy?...”

Happy is not among the first words that come to mind. They are clearly stunning on the outside, but they do not exude real joy from within, and any single woman who has been dating too long and too much can tell you why: Sex in the city feels good for fleeting moments; it’s no ticket to a satisfaction that endures. And there lies the ancient reason why most Americans still choose to get married. Being single is lonely. Humans need long-term companionship.

Most women don’t want intimacy on the fly with a carousel of lovers. Most women want to finally find a partner who looks beyond the bottle-gold fibers of highlighted hair, and into the fiber of their being. Most women want to be able to skip shaving their legs once in a while and still feel beautiful in the eyes of their men.”

3. Bottom line: men and women have not changed deep down inside where it really counts. All of us, no one is excluded, are looking for love, and a love that will last. However, once we do find it, how do we keep it, and keep it for a lifetime? Solomon would say, “by fanning the flames.” James Russell Lowell in his poem entitled “Love” wrote,

True love is,
A love that shall be new and fresh each hour,
As is the sunset’s golden mystery
Or the sweet coming of the evening star,
Alike, and yet most unlike, every day,

And seeming ever best and fairest now.

I like that. It speaks to my heart and my soul. It sounds like the kind of love that lasts. God's Word is interested in a love that lasts, a love that daily needs the flames of its fire stoked to a passionate burning. How is such a love achieved? In Song of Solomon 1:15 – 2:7 we discover three very helpful suggestions.

I. Praise Your Partner. 1:15 – 2:2

Praising our partner is a constant theme in the Song of Solomon because it is an essential ingredient for a healthy marriage. Again and again we see the man praising his lady and the lady praising her man. Communication, gracious and kind words, are the currency that buys and builds a lasting love relationship. Previously, we noted the blessings that flow when we say positive things to and about our mate. It might be more uncomfortable, but it is probably helpful if we also examine some things we should not say. Our friend Steve Stephens is again a big help when he writes,

“There is nothing more painful than having unhealthy communication with the one you love. It is through communication that we connect and our spirits touch. If that connection becomes contaminated, it is only a matter of time before the whole relationship is poisoned. In the process of communication, wisdom is [sometimes] knowing what not to say rather than what to say...

Therefore, I gathered together some close friends and asked them what not to say to your spouse. Here is their list:

“I told you so.”
 “You’re just like your mother.”
 “You’re always in a bad mood.”
 “You just don’t think.”
 “It’s your fault.”
 “What’s wrong with you?”
 “All you ever do is complain.”
 “I can’t do anything to please you.”
 “You get what you deserve.”
 “Why don’t you ever listen to me?”
 “Can’t you be more responsible?”
 “What were you thinking?”
 “You’re impossible!”
 “I don’t know why I put up with you.”

“I can talk to you until I’m blue in the face and it doesn’t do any good.”

“I can do whatever I like.”

“If you don’t like it, you can just leave.”

“Can’t you do anything right?”

“That was stupid.”

“All you ever do is think of yourself.”

“If you really loved me, you’d do this.”

“You’re such a baby.”

“Turnabout’s fair play.”

“You deserve a dose of your own medicine.”

“What’s your problem?”

“I can never understand you.”

“Do you always have to be right?”

Both Solomon and Shulamith knew the importance of words. Both were interested in fanning the flames of love. They continue their contest to see who can “out-praise” and “out-compliment” the other. What are the particulars of their praise with which they challenge us?

1. Admire their attractiveness. 1:15-16

1. Solomon twice tells his bride “how beautiful you are my darling.” “My darling” can also be translated “my love.” This is not the first time Solomon has complimented her appearance. Perhaps once is not enough. I asked Charlotte one time if I could ever tell her too often, “I love you” and “I think you are beautiful.” Her answer was “Absolutely not!” She said she never got tired of my praising her or of my saying “I love you.”
2. Solomon also says Shulamith has the eyes of a dove. “Beautiful eyes were a hallmark of perfection in a woman (cf. Rachel and Leah, Gn. 29:17). Rabbinic tradition identifies beautiful eyes with a beautiful personality.”¹ Solomon, as he looked into her eyes, saw gentleness and tranquility, purity and simplicity. Her eyes were an eloquent witness to the radiant woman on the inside. You know our eyes are a very significant device of communication. Outside of our words, they are our most important and effective means of communication. When we lived in Dallas, Texas there was a woman who attended our church who was one mean lady. I have often said, somewhat playfully, that on any night there was a full moon over Dallas you could see her circling the city on her broom! Well, one Sunday after church, we finished a conversation with this woman as nice as we could. We then got into our van to go home. Charlotte and I are the parents of four sons, the oldest two being twins. One of the twins (they were probably eight or nine years old) came up front as we were about to leave and said, “Daddy, you know that lady you and mama were talking to? She scares me.” Well, I started to say, “she scares me, too!” but I didn’t. I did the proper daddy thing and said, “Oh? Why does she scare you?” His answer: “Well, she smiles with her face, but she has real mean eyes.” Eyes sometimes speak louder than our words don’t they? Shulamith smiled not just with her face. She also smiled with her eyes. Solomon admired and was captivated by her attractiveness, by

¹ Carr, 86.

her beauty on the outside as well as her beauty on the inside. Eyes are, after all, windows into the soul.

3. Shulamith now returns the favor of her man's compliment. It is given willingly and honestly. "Behold, you are handsome my beloved; indeed you are pleasant." The word "handsome" is the same word as "beautiful" in verse 15, except it is in the masculine gender. "The word occurs 14 times in the Song, but only this once in the masculine form."² There is also an intensity to her words of praise. She continues by saying he is "pleasant." He calms her spirit. He puts her at rest. He sets her heart at peace. The kindness of his words in verse 15 were thoughtful. They met her at her point of need and they spoke to her heart. The words were important. The man behind the words is essential. A woman is impressed by a man who understands and respects her personal and emotional needs. She loves a man who talks, who communicates. She is attracted to a man who says to her, "You have first place in my affections." She will respond, and respond with enthusiasm and energy to a man who treats her in this way.

2. Acknowledge their thoughtfulness. 1:16-17

Shulamith continues her praise of Solomon by pointing out their "bed or couch is green (verdant). The beams of our houses are cedar, and our rafters of fir." Three times the word "our" occurs. His thoughtfulness in preparing a home for them is a source of security. No wonder her eyes speak tranquility and peace. John Snaith notes interestingly, "Our couch denotes in Amos 6:4 particularly stylish and magnificent couches used for feasting; so the couch here ... is not ... any old bed!"³ Solomon's thoughtfulness has provided a strong, sturdy (even royal) home. Their home will be safe and secure, a responsibility God expects a man to bear. It will also be sexual and sensual. The bedroom is green. It is alive, fresh, fruitful. It will be a place of activity and growth, an environment conducive for the passionate lovemaking God says is a good thing in the marriage bed. Solomon is no insensitive male, and Shulamith appreciates and acknowledges his thoughtfulness. He will discover his actions were well worth the effort.

3. Affirm their uniqueness. 2:1-2

1. Shulamith sees herself as "the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys." Solomon then adds, "Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters." This woman is utterly unique, rare and special to Solomon. His words have lifted her heart and self-worth to new heights. "The battle of praise" continues. "Rose of Sharon" is more accurately "a wild autumn flower of the valley."⁴ "Sharon" is the low coastal plain which stretches from Mt. Carmel to the Egyptian border. Wild flowers grew in great abundance here. "Lily of the Valley" may refer to a lovely white blossom with six leaves

² Ibid.

³ John G. Snaith, *Song of Songs*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 25.

⁴ Paige Patterson, *Song of Solomon* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 45.

and six petals. “This flower was especially associated with nuptial occasions...”⁵ Shulamith, because of Solomon’s praise, sees herself as a beautiful wild flower, free and untamed by any gardener. She is unique and uniquely Solomon’s. She possesses a natural beauty and a natural desire for her man. No one has cultivated this unpicked flower. That is an assignment and privilege reserved for her future husband, and him alone.

2. Solomon’s statement that she is “like a lily among thorns” only reinforces the imagery of uniqueness. Shulamith is not just a flower among many flowers. She is a lily, a beautiful wild flower amidst thorns. She is a flower. All other women are thorns. By comparison, other women bring pain and are totally undesirable. Shulamith is his love. She is like an only flower in a world of thorny weeds. Such praise will not cause other women to applaud him. They will, however, cause his love to adore him. There is not another like her as far as he is concerned. This is how to fan the flames of love.

II. Proclaim Their Provision. 2:3

Verse three is specific and it is sensual. The passion of love is running full throttle. Solomon has told Shulamith some of the real joys she brings to him and how she is the only woman in his life. The confidence she feels in their relationship frees her to give herself in unreserved abandonment. Solomon has created a romantic atmosphere. He has built his bride up by focusing on her positive features and gifts. Her response is nothing short of awesome.

1. Tell others how they protect you.

An apple tree in the woods would be rare and something you would not expect to find. It, of course, would be sweet to the taste, and would provide needed sustenance. Solomon said she was a flower woman among thorny women. Shulamith says that Solomon is a special apple tree amidst common woods. Finding him brought her “great delight” and she decides to sit down in his shade. She delights in him. She is comforted by him. She is protected by him and only him, and as never before. “I never knew love before, then came you” could be the song of Shulamith’s heart.

2. Tell others how they please you.

Apples were believed by some in the ancient world to have sensual and erotic qualities. Shulamith is secure and safe in Solomon’s shade, his watchcare. She now longs for physical intimacy, for lovemaking and sexual union. She simply says, “his fruit was sweet to my taste.” The language is chaste and appropriate. It is not lewd or out of bounds. It is also highly suggestive and erotic. What I find in him I like. What I taste, and smell and feel is sweet and causes me to want more and more. Romance truly is an environment which prepares us for sexual union. As they anticipate their wedding night (4:1 – 5:1) the flames of passion are under control, but burning. Is God really in favor of what is ahead? Absolutely!

⁵ Ibid.

In fact, God has given us some “Biblical Principles Governing Sex.” Given that our text anticipates the issue, let us consider some good guidelines given by a good God.

1. Sexual relations within marriage are holy and good. God encourages intimate relations and even warns against their cessation. (1 Cor. 7:5).
2. Pleasure in sexual relations is both healthy and expected (the bodies of both parties belong to each; Prov. 5:15-19; 1 Cor. 7:4).
3. Sexual pleasure is to be guided by the principle that one’s sexuality is to be other-oriented (“rights” over one’s body are given in marriage to the other party; Phil. 2:3-4).
4. Sexual relations are to be regular and normal. No exact number of times per week is right or correct, but the biblical principle is that both parties are to provide adequate sexual satisfaction so that both “burning” (sexual desire) and temptation to find satisfaction elsewhere are avoided (1 Cor. 7:9)
5. The principle of satisfaction means that each party is to provide sexual enjoyment (which is “due” him or her in marriage) as frequently as the other party requires. Other biblical principles (moderation, seeking to please another rather than oneself, etc.) also come into play. Consideration of one’s mate is to guide one’s requests for sexual relations.
6. In accordance with the principle of “rights,” there is to be no sexual bargaining between married persons (“I’ll not have relations unless you ...”). Neither party has the right to make such bargains. This is a form of “marital prostitution” and must be avoided.
7. Sexual relations are equal and reciprocal. The Bible does not give the man superior rights to the woman or the woman superior rights to the man. Mutual stimulation and mutual initiation of relations are legitimate.
8. Whatever is safe, pleasing, enjoyable, and satisfying to both is acceptable. The body of each belongs to the other (1 Cor. 7:4). Neither should demand from the other what is painful, harmful, degrading or distasteful to him or her.

III. Prepare For Passion. 2:4-7

These verses continue the theme of romance. Interestingly there is both encouragement and warning. Sex is a powerful gift. It is intoxicating. It has unbelievable potential for good or evil, to build up or tear down, to delight or destroy. Solomon gives us some additional instruction to insure maximum sex, maximum safety, and maximum satisfaction. This is the sex God has planned from the beginning.

1. Make love in the right place. 2:4

The man takes his bride into “the banqueting house,” literally “the house of wine.” This scene anticipates the wedding night. The open vineyard with all its beauty and encouragement to love may be in view. Regardless it will be a place reserved only and exclusively for them. The imagery of wine again speaks of the intoxicating love they will share.

2. Make love with the right commitment. 2:4

“His banner over me is love” speaks of the protective love of her lover, and the safe place he has brought her. It also testifies that the love which the king has for her is evident to everyone. He does not say one thing to her in private and contradict that in public. He is not warm and considerate when they are alone but cold and sarcastic when they are with others. He is not ashamed of his love for her. He is glad for all to see. No wonder she grew more and more secure in his love. Carr notes that some translate the Hebrew text, which is admittedly difficult at this point, in a way that is even more strikingly sensual: “and his wish regarding me was love-making, or more simply his intentions were to make love.”⁶ Solomon wants her and she wants him. They are the right partners. They have the right passion. They have the right place. But, all the essential ingredients are still not present.

3. Make love in the right way. 2:5-6

1. Shulamith says she is in the midst of a great feast and she thinks about their lovemaking. Her mind carries her away to the joys of marriage which are just around the corner. The Bible teaches that we should feast on our mate and that God smiles when we do. Shulamith is so overcome with the passion of the moment she feels faint. “For I am lovesick” is translated in the NIV as “I am faint with love.” The “I” is emphatic. “I myself am swooning in the rapture of the moment.” Does she wish to bail out and bring all of this to a sudden halt?! Oh No! On the contrary she asks for raisin cakes and apples to strengthen and restore her that she might enjoy more. “Sustain” and “refresh” are imperatives. She demands the necessary nourishment she needs to continue in the passion of their lovemaking. Raisin cakes and apples both were viewed as highly erotic and sensual. There is no question of the intent of her desire. One can hardly imagine the reciprocal response all of this would have brought about on the part of Solomon.
2. In the passion of their love Shulamith has not lost sight or sense of the warmth, intimacy and security of their relationship. With one hand he cradles her head. With the other he holds and caresses her. It is interesting to note that the word “embrace” is used in the Old Testament “both of a friendly greeting (Gn. 48:10) and of sexual union (Pr. 5:20).”⁷ He is her friend and her lover. Both are important to her. Both are important to all women. No man should ever forget this.

⁶ Carr, 91.

⁷ Carr, 93.

4. Make love at the right time. 2:7

Sexual relationships should take place at the right place with the right person in the right way at the right time. Not any time is a good time. There is indeed a proper time, a God-time. Verse seven is a recurring theme in the Song (cf. 3:5; 8:4) underlying its importance. So crucial is it that it takes the form of an oath. The word “charge” means to adjure or urge. Shulamith is directing her words to the sorority of females (daughters of Jerusalem) as she warns them to pursue passion at the proper pace. The “gazelles” and “does” were both beautiful female animals, vigorous and sexually active. She understands that though men are usually viewed as the more sexually active and interested, God created women as sexual beings with sexual desires also. All of us are susceptible to our passions getting out of control, overriding both our reason and will, and causing massive hurt and damage. Folks, understand and understand well: God gave us sex as a wonderful gift to be enjoyed between a man and a woman within the bonds of marriage. This plan of His will never change. He gave us such a plan not to “rain on our parade” or “steal our fun.” He gave us this plan because it brings Him glory and it is for our good. Therefore Shulamith warns us, “Do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases,” until the time is right. Passion is great when the place for its expression is the marriage bed. Duane Garrett says it well, “the girls should not allow themselves to be aroused sexually until the proper time and person arrives. The natural joy of sexual awakening is ruined by premature experimentation.”⁸

Conclusion

Maximum sex is marriage sex. The best sex is believers’ sex. Why? Because through a relationship with Jesus Christ you see sex as one of the most beautiful aspects of life. You come to understand that it is more enjoyable to give than to receive, that bodily pleasure can also be spiritual, that men and women have equal rights to sexual pleasure, and that the quality of a sexual relationship is more than just physical pleasure, but it is not less than physical pleasure. God has given us a great gift. Let us enjoy it as He designed it. You will find the delights to be greater than you ever imagined.

⁸ Garrett, 392-393.

THINKING ABOUT SEX

If only because one of them is a man and the other a woman, married couples usually have quite different attitudes and approaches to sex. Furthermore, many people may come to marriage with varying beliefs and expectations. This attitude assessment tool is designed to open up discussion about these differences. Take it with your partner and see what you can learn about each other.

Agree	Disagree	Uncer tain	
_____	_____	_____	Sex is one of the most beautiful aspects of life.
_____	_____	_____	It is more enjoyable to give than to receive.
_____	_____	_____	Bodily pleasure is fleshly and not spiritual.
_____	_____	_____	Sexual intercourse is primarily for physical release.
_____	_____	_____	Our religious beliefs have the greatest influence on our attitudes toward sexual behavior.
_____	_____	_____	Men and women have equal rights to sexual pleasure.
_____	_____	_____	There are sexual activities that I would consider wrong for a married couple to practices. If you agree, list these:
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	To be truly satisfying, intercourse must lead to simultaneous orgasm.
_____	_____	_____	Sexual fantasies are normal.
_____	_____	_____	Masturbation (self-stimulation) is an acceptable means for sexual pleasure and release.
_____	_____	_____	The male always should be the aggressor in sexual activity.
_____	_____	_____	In general, women don't enjoy sex as much as men.
_____	_____	_____	Men should be allowed more freedom in sexual

_____ _____ _____ behavior than women.
_____ _____ _____ The quality of a sexual
_____ _____ _____ relationship is more than
_____ _____ _____ just physical pleasure.

(Adapted from Sexual Fulfillment in Marriage: A Multimedia Learning Kit by Clifford and Joyce Penner, Family Concern, Inc., 1977. Available through the Penners at 2 N. Lake Avenue, Suite 610, Pasadena, California 91101)