

Series: The Greatest Song of All, #5  
Valley Community Baptist Church  
Avon, CT

Texts: Song of Songs 4:1-4; 8-10, 12-15  
Jan. 31/Feb. 1, 2015  
Pastor Jay Abramson

### **How Do I Love Thee?**

*The Chronicle of Higher Education* did a survey of college and university bookstores around the country to see what non-textbooks students were buying. The top ten was an interesting mix of books, most of them written within the last few years. But in the number three spot was a book written 200 years ago. A 200-year-old book, number three on the top ten list on college campuses? What could that be? What's your guess?

"The envelope please..." And the winner is: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. And my guess is that most of these books were purchased by young women. In an age of egalitarianism and in a sub-group that has a higher percentage of radical feminists than any other sub-group in the culture, what could they possibly find attractive about a love story from Victorian England? Columnist Suzanne Venker writes:

Jane Austen understood the male/female dance... The goal is [not to find fast love] but lasting love... When modern women read her stories, they absorb a message that sounds foreign to them. Yet good. <sup>i</sup>

We're coming now to the most intimate section of this already intimate love song. It makes us blush just to hear it read! But in a culture preoccupied with unrestrained sex, a culture that now is beginning to pay the horrendous price of "Animal House" college life - which is that, almost weekly, we hear of another young school teacher having sex with a student - we must see what God's perfect intentions and boundaries have always been for marriage. We must carefully study God's lessons in intimacy. So, first let's notice...

#### **I. The Role of Persuasive Words**

Here in chapter 4, the man, the Lover is speaking until the woman speaks at the very end. What is the setting? This chapter is a short period of time leading up to the wedding. The man is using persuasive words to invite and entice his woman to become his bride. As scholar Dr. Duane Garrett describes it:

For him to gain her affection and devotion, he must touch her soul with language. The *Song of Songs* is not just about sexuality and the bodies of the man and woman; it is a work of tender, affectionate speech." <sup>ii</sup>

A near contemporary of Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wrote the poem from which I've taken this week's sermon title, "How Do I Love Thee?" This is a love poem which became one of the most popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It begins:

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of being and ideal grace.*

Love poetry is an art and a skill. Poets are perhaps the most skilled of all humans when it comes to the work of putting emotions into words. But any words can be poetic in the mind of a lover, can't they? When you are romantically drawn to

someone, any well-intended words sound like poetry to you, don't they? The poetry of Solomon doesn't necessarily sound that enticing to us but that's because we're separated from him by about 3000 years and a very different culture. You know, I could try it but I'm pretty sure Liz wouldn't feel very complimented if I told her that her hair reminded me of a "flock of goats." Or if I told her that her teeth looked like "a flock of sheep just shorn." If I said, "Come with me... descend from the crest of Amana," I'm afraid she might respond, "What does the refrigerator have to do with anything?"

But even if I used clumsy words like that, and she knew I was sincerely trying to express deep emotions from my heart, she might smile, but she would re-interpret them as poetry equal to that of Shakespeare. I know, because she's done that many, many times.

So, once again, let's transpose this discussion to our higher love story, our communications with God. Has He, our spiritual groom, ever wooed us with persuasive words? Oh, yes. He's used 40 authors, three languages, literary forms and images that span a period of more than 1,500 years to try to "move your soul with language." Are you reading His love notes? Are you listening to His music? Even if you have acted like Israel and not been faithful to Him, have you listened to the song God sings to both Israel and us? Listen:

**Therefore I am now going to allure her;  
I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her.  
"In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband';  
you will no longer call me 'my master.'  
I will betroth you to me forever...  
...I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.'  
I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people';  
And they will say, 'You are my God.' (Hosea 2:14, 16, 19, 23)**

God has been singing you this song since the day you were born. Have you heard Him? How have you responded to His words of persuasion?

Secondly, we must see in this chapter that...

## **II. The Bride Must Decide.**

What is it that separates this couple here in chapter three? It isn't geography. It isn't politics or culture or any prohibition of God. They are "qualified" to live as a married couple. Then what keeps them apart? It's the decision of the bride. It's up to her to decide whether she will give herself and the most precious, symbolic gift that any woman can give to any man – her virginity. Her family isn't against it, the state isn't against it, God's not against it – then what is the groom waiting for? He's waiting for her to decide. Dr. Garrett puts it bluntly:

**"Virginity makes the woman unattainable to the man."**

Please notice that coercion is not even contemplated by Solomon. We read how much he desires her, but this same deep desire is disciplined by his equally strong respect for her honor. The decision is up to her, not him. This is what he is alluding to when he says:

**You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;  
You are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain. (Song of Songs 4:12)**

He's waiting for her decision. Do you see how this matches Jesus' way with you? He desires nothing in His universe more than your love. I'm serious about that! He's God! He can have anything He wants and what He desires most is your love, just as a man desires the love of a woman: (Song of Songs 4:9)

**You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;**

**You have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes...**

When God first saw you, it was love at first sight. When He was speaking to Israel through the prophet Hosea, He was very frustrated with Israel's unfaithfulness. In Peterson's translation, *The Message*, we clearly hear in His frustration what God's greatest desire is. Listen: (Hosea 6:4, 5, 6)

**What am I to do with you, Ephraim?...**

**Your declarations of love last no longer than morning mist...**

**That's why I use prophets to shake you to attention...**

**I'm after love that lasts, not more religion.**

**I want you to know [Me!]GOD, not go to more prayer meetings.**

But just like Solomon in this song, God will not coerce you into a decision. He waits for you to decide whether you will choose a deep and lasting friendship with Him or with someone else. Joshua confirmed this with the people of God in his day. He said to them:

**But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:15)**

Jesus treated people with this same freedom. He didn't force anyone to follow Him. He simply invited them to come.

One day, Jesus invited Matthew, a hated tax collector for the Roman hierarchy, to follow Him. And right there, immediately, he chose to do so. Later, while Jesus was having lunch with Matthew and some of his rowdy tax-collector friends, the Pharisees asked His disciples why He was eating with people like that! Do you know what He said? Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 that I just read, where God says His greatest desire is to have our love. Listen to Jesus:

**...It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Matt. 9:12, 13)**

The Hebrew word for mercy, *hesed*, also means "love." Jesus wasn't saying He didn't love righteous people. He was saying, "I already have their love. I'm here to convince as many other people as I can that I desire their love as well." God treats all of us as the woman in Song of Songs is treated – He desires to be in a love relationship with us, but He will not force it. You must decide. What will it be? Lastly, we see in this chapter that...

### **III. Biblical Marriage Is a Public Affair.**

Most western marriages are public affairs, to a point. What I mean is, they are not "public" as Old Testament Jewish marriages were public. Let me give you a brief description. First of all, the "wedding day" was actually a wedding week or even two weeks. The best time for weddings was the fall, after the harvest, because

there was going to be a lot of eating and dancing and games and more eating. After the harvest there was plenty of food and fall evenings in Israel are delightful to sit outside and enjoy.

Who was invited? Everyone, literally everyone! All your relatives, all your friends and even the friends of your friends. The whole village showed up! Each day of the feast something new was happening, which I don't have time to go into, so let's talk about the ceremony. First of all, this book, *Song of Songs*, was used as a template for many ceremonies. The bride and groom and the bridesmaids and groomsmen actually sang parts of this song back and forth during the ceremony. Blessings were spoken, vows were made, seeds of pomegranates were thrown at the couple and wine and food and dancing and games were enjoyed by all.

The ceremony usually took place on the evening of the second night. After the reception, there was no honeymoon for the couple to get away in private. No, no, no. There was a "honeymoon tent" where the bride and groom went to consummate their marriage WHILE the guests continued to enjoy the feast with singing and dancing and... you can only imagine! So, while the couple is in the tent, wedding guests might actually be outside singing Song of Songs 4:16:

**Awake, north wind, and come, south wind!**

**Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread abroad.**

**Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.**

The newly married couple was not alone until everyone went home five, ten or more days later! So, when I say it was public, I mean PUBLIC!!!

Dr. Dennis Kinlaw of Asbury Seminary writes this lesson for all of us:

What one does with one's sexuality is from a biblical perspective always more than a private, personal thing. It has widespread social implications.

Biblically, when a lover gives himself to his beloved as these two have done, the relationship of each has changed to all the rest of the human race...

Self-giving love between the sexes is of social significance. Society must know. How else can marriage be a witness and testimony to the relationship of Christ and the church? One Savior, one spouse!

...The woman now belongs to the man and the man to the woman. This changes all other personal relationships. <sup>iii</sup>

Our culture talks about our marriages and/or our sexual behavior as being a "private matter." The Bible teaches that this is not true. It's not true because what happens in our marriages and our families directly impacts the community we live in. The definition of a community is "a group of people living a common life." It's people who are connected with each other. The health of our marriages, then, will determine the health of our community. The health of our nation is not determined at the ballot box. What happens at the ballot box is determined by the health of our marriages, families and individuals. Prov. 4:23 says:

**Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.**

Jesus said in Matt. 12:34, 35:

**For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.**

These verses are telling us what Jewish weddings are telling us; your private life DETERMINES your public life. They are not separate. They are welded together. Your prayer life is the most intimate part of your relationship with God. So, how healthy is your prayer life these days? We've designed a simple plan to encourage you in this critical part of your life. We're declaring the month of February a month of prayer and this card is a tool you can use daily to prompt you to spend time communicating with God. I don't want you to think of this as a requirement. I want you to think of this as an opportunity. An opportunity to spend time, even if it's just a few minutes with One who loves you more than you can imagine. It's a way that you can say to God daily, "How do I love you, Lord? Let me count the ways." Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> Suzanne Venker, "Four things Jane Austen teaches us about love," FoxNews.com, Feb. 17, 2013

<sup>ii</sup> Duane Garrett, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 23B* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004)

<sup>iii</sup> Dr. Dennis F. Kinlaw, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 5, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1991), p. 1230, 1231