

“I didn’t fall in love with my wife.”

By Matt Walsh

It’s no surprise that we are so bad at marriage in this culture.

We’re bad at it because we don’t understand it, and we don’t understand it because we don’t understand love. You can’t forge a lasting marriage if all you know about love is what you learned from an Ed Sheeran song. It’s like trying to build a car when you think engines run on fairy dust. And that’s essentially how many of us approach marriage. We believe it’s fueled by some intense and mystical emotional force – a force we inaccurately call “love” – and as soon as we run out of this mysterious cosmic gasoline all we can do is send it to the scrap yard and find a new model.

This view is popular in our society because it removes all responsibility and blame from the individual. Marriage is presented as a passive endeavor, established and destroyed by forces outside of our control. Love is something you “fall into,” like a puddle, and then “out of,” like an unsafe carnival ride, and there’s not much you can really do to cause the one or prevent the other. “These things happen,” we say. Oops, I’m married. Oops, I’m having an affair. Oops, I’m divorced. Oops, I’m married again. Oops, I’m divorced again. Oops, I’m lonely and isolated and everyone I’ve ever known resents me. Oops!

But here’s the reality: these were our choices, every step of the way, and that state which we’ve found ourselves falling in and out of is not real love. Real love is an act of will. A decision. A conscious activity. It is something you do and live. Love is chosen, and if it is protected and nurtured, it grows. Love is sacrifice. Love is effort. Love is everything St. Paul describes in First Corinthians, and especially in Ephesians 5: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.” Love is dying to the self. Love is many things, and none of them happen by accident.

Even people who understand this will still sometimes talk about love in a way that contributes to the confusion. A married couple may describe the moment they “fell in love,” very early on in their relationship, well before they walked down the aisle. They may even claim to have experienced “love at first sight.” This is all fine fodder for Hallmark cards and Nicholas Sparks novels – which, as we know, are based on Hallmark cards – but it doesn’t actually make sense. Far be it for me to make this determination, but, no, you didn’t love your wife the moment you laid eyes on her. You thought she was hot, sure, but that’s not the same thing.

I can say with certainty that I love my wife now. I can also say that I did not love her a week after I’d met her. I surely didn’t love her the first time I saw her. I thought she was beautiful. I liked a lot of things about her. But love her? No. How could I? I didn’t know

her. I'd made no commitment to her. I wasn't sharing my life with her. I wasn't really sharing anything with her except for an appetizer at Chili's. Yes, I loved her as a child of God, in the same sense that I'm obligated to love all humanity, but I didn't love her in the way that I love her now. I couldn't have. This love, the love we have now is defined by commitment, sacrifice, and devotion, and none of those dimensions are present when you're just dating someone.

It's more accurate to say, when we first met, I was infatuated with her. There was an intense, mostly selfish, attachment. I wasn't being intentionally selfish, it just made me feel good to be around her, so I tried to be around her as much as possible. That's what I liked most about her at this stage: how she made me feel. I didn't "love" her for her own sake, but for my sake. I think every relationship must start this way, but it can't survive if it stays this way.

Absurdly, people often refer to this period of infatuation as the "in love phase," but there couldn't be a worse way to describe it. This phase, this extraordinary emotional pull that you feel early in a relationship, is supposed to be the fuel that drives you to the altar. It isn't love itself, but it gives you incentive and energy to get there. It's like the thrust that jettisons a rocket into outer space. If I knew anything about astrophysics I could extend the analogy, but hopefully you get my point. The infatuation you feel for your girlfriend has no real meaning or value on its own; it is, rather, a propulsion *towards* something.

The trouble is, in our culture, couples experience that propulsion but they don't go anywhere with it. They have all of this emotional energy, all of this fuel, but they're afraid to make the journey into the great beyond. Or they wait until it's worn off and then, by default, after years of living together, finally tie the knot. There's a reason why those relationships are much more likely to end in divorce. The so-called "in love phase" – which really has nothing to do with love – died away long ago, but it didn't develop into true love because true love requires commitment. So they've lived with each other without the emotional attachment, and without love for years before finally wandering lazily down the aisle. Not a good way to start things.

More commonly, of course, people will stay together only so long as the infatuation lasts. That's how you end up with a generation of 20 and 30-somethings who've never been married but think they've had deep, rich "love" for, like 19 different people. In truth, they never loved anyone. They simply experienced a fleeting enthusiasm over and over again. They've fallen into infatuation many times. They never once chose love.

That's the thing about martial love: it's willful and decisive, but it also requires boldness and courage, because you won't have it in its realest sense until after you've already gotten married. You say at the altar not that you have loved or did love your betrothed, but that you *will*. You're choosing love, right then and there, despite not knowing them

very well. After all, even if you date for a couple of years before marriage, which I don't necessarily recommend, you still won't know your future spouse with even a fraction of the depth and intimacy that you'll know them after 5 or 10 or 15 or 20 years of marriage. You know them only as a separate person, not as a person united with yourself until death. Yet you choose love anyway, and you are bound by that choice forever. This is the great power and mystery of the sacrament.

This is why I wouldn't say that I ever "fell in love" with my wife. What makes our love real and fruitful is precisely that we didn't fall into it. We promised it, made it, built it, established it, fought for it – there are many verbs you could use, but not "fall." A man falls because he's clumsy and gravity sneaks up on him. That's not at all how marital love is formed or sustained, thank God. Our love is not a careless coincidence or a product of circumstance. It is so much greater than that.

It's especially crucial for married couples to keep this in mind because, although my wife and I have not experienced this, many couples who've been together far longer than us will tell of emotional dry seasons that lasted for long stretches. During this period, they felt little attraction or affection, yet they still loved. They gained no emotional benefit from being around each other, but they still had their love. They loved because they understood that love is an act of devotion, and they were not relieved from the duty of that devotion just because they no longer felt all warm and fuzzy inside.

To a lot of people nowadays it seems almost scandalous to imagine that a couple would stay together even when their feelings turn cold for a time. We can't understand that level of fidelity and sacrifice because, to us, the whole point of any romantic relationship is to find personal satisfaction. We "love" each other only as long as we get something immediate and pleasurable out of it. Once that goes, we go. Our love is no deeper and no more real after marriage than it was 5 seconds after we met. We "love" our spouses the same way we "loved" the person we took to our 9th grade homecoming dance.

Inevitably, if we approach marriage like hormonal teenagers, we will see the emotional dry season as an indication that we've "fallen out of love." We won't fight for our marriage or remain committed to our spouses because we think the whole point of our union was the emotional high it gave us. Now it's gone, we don't know why, and we can't do anything about it. We're utterly helpless. Love was like a magical elf that stayed with us for a while then scurried suddenly away, and all we can do is say farewell as it disappears into the woods. "Wave goodbye to our love, honey, it's leaving now. Welp, time to get divorced."

Naturally, this mentality also leads quickly to affairs. If love just "happens," then who is to say it won't "happen" with your coworker or someone you met at the gym? And if this thing that happens is actually love, and not, as I say, mere infatuation, then shouldn't

you go and be with that person? You love them! It was meant to be! The fact that it came to be after you'd already married someone else is an unfortunate detail that can be dealt with later. If pursuing this "love" means dissolving your current family, well, then it's the right thing to do – the "loving" thing, even. The kids will understand!

Speaking of kids, here's a question for anyone who thinks they have fallen, or might fall, "out of love" with their spouse: what about your children? Can you fall out of love with them? And what if you do? Would you ever say to your daughter, "Sorry, I'm not feeling it anymore. The love is gone. I'm calling the adoption agency"?

No, most of us would agree that such a thing would be horrific. Even if you don't feel particularly affectionate towards your kids in any particular moment – every parent has been there – you still love them and you recognize that you have a duty to them. All decent human beings understand that you can't abandon your children just because you have some unpleasant feelings about parenting. So, why don't we understand this about marriage? Why do we love our kids no matter what, while attaching a series of conditions to the love we have for the very person we publicly pledged to love unconditionally?

For my part, I know that I owe my love to my kids and my wife, but nobody is more entitled to it – to me, all of me – than my wife. I am in debt to her. I promised her my love and I am called to fulfill that promise. True, it's easy now. She's a beautiful person, through and through, so holding up my end of the bargain is not a chore. But if those were conditions for my love – if I only intended to love her as long as she can stun me with her grace and beauty – then I would not love her at all. I would be a mercenary, in it just to get mine for as long as it remains profitable. That's a fine approach to business, but it's just not how marriage is supposed to work.