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The Garden of Love The Song of Songs 4.12-5.1

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What's the title of a love song you like? There are thousands to choose from and our answers depend on our age and taste in music. Most popular songs are about looking for love, falling in love, being in love, or losing love. The final # 1 pop song in the United States for the decade of the 1970's was called Escape (The Pina Colada song) by Rupert Holmes, and it includes a reference to the Cape. That song came to the attention of a new generation when it was part of the soundtrack of the highly successful 2014 movie, *Guardians of the Galaxy*. The song is about a couple who don't properly nurture and care for their relationship and they both look for love elsewhere. If you think about it, it's a sad song about two people looking to cheat. He describes their relationship as *"a worn out recording of a favorite song,"* and says they *"had fallen into the same old dull routine."* While she sleeps next to him, he pulls out the paper, looks through the personal ads (for those who don't know what newspapers and personal ads were, it was a totally different world back then) and sees an ad that reads in part: *"If you like piña coladas... come with me and escape."* He responds with his own ad, and they meet at a bar called O'Malley's to plan their escape only to discover that the person they hoped would add excitement to their lives is their spouse! The song ends on a positive note as they seemingly have found a renewed sense of appreciation and connection. I get annoyed at the guy saying in the third verse, *"I never knew, That you like piña coladas And gettin' caught in the rain, And the feel of the ocean,"* and a few other more intimate things. **And that's the problem**, he should have known. They should have communicated better. They should have made their love and faithfulness to one another a priority.

The Bible contains a book that's a love song. It's referred to as both the Song of Songs and the Song of Solomon and it's a romantic book about the passionate love of a bride and groom. Listen to **The Song of Songs 4.12-5.1, the bridegroom is speaking, "A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed.** Your channel is an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and

aloes, with all chief spices— **a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams** from Lebanon.

(The bride replies) Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind!

Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad.

Let my beloved come to his **garden**, and eat its choicest fruits.

(Bridegroom) I come to **my garden**, my sister, my bride;

I gather my myrrh with my spice, I eat my honeycomb with my honey,

I drink my wine with my milk.

(The groom says to all) Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love.”

In our service today we've heard three passages about love. **Proverbs 3:3-4** declares that love and faithfulness are priorities in our relationships. We're told to bind those virtues around our neck and write them on the tablet of our heart, so we never forget their importance in finding favor and a good reputation with God and people. A lack of love, disloyalty, and unfaithfulness lead to deep wounds in a relationship and a reputation.

In **1 Corinthians 13**, Paul describes what love is and what it is not, and how love responds in different situations. Each of us can reflect on which aspects of love are easier for us and which ones are more difficult for us to practice. 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most read passages at weddings, even though the love being described in that chapter is first and foremost not describing marital love, but how disciples of Jesus are to love and treat other members of the church as they use their spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 14 are both about spiritual gifts and in between them chapter 13 is about the way we use them, because if we don't do what we do in love, we're just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

The book of **Song and Songs** is about the love and desire of a groom and a bride, yet it doesn't get used at many weddings, although Jill and I used a passage from it at our wedding and I encourage couples to consider it.

In our series on **the Gardens of God**, today we move from the Garden of Eden and all that happened there to **the garden of love** in the Song of Songs. Song of Songs uses garden imagery to express the beauty and intimacy of the love between a bride and groom. The beloved is likened to a garden, enclosed and locked, symbolizing exclusivity and purity in love (Song of Solomon 4:12-15). This garden represents a place of mutual delight and satisfaction, where love flourishes. It echoes the harmony and perfection of the Garden of Eden, highlighting the potential for human relationships to reflect divine love.

The three passages we've heard today contain wisdom that can help not only married couples to have a better, deeper, and stronger marriage, but the principles can help anyone to love other people and to be a more desirable person for someone to love. So, while I'll be talking a bit about love in a marriage today, I hope those of you who aren't currently married will also hear some principles and practical help that are beneficial in all relationships. The same practices that can help us communicate better with our wife or husband can also help us in our relationships with other family members, friends, classmates, or coworkers. Here are a few of the things we can learn from Song of Songs 4:12-5:1, Proverbs 3:1-4, and 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a.

1. Speak Words of Affirmation and Love

If you read Song of Songs chapter 4 beginning at verse one, you'll see the first twelve verses of the chapter are the bridegroom telling his bride in a detailed way how gorgeous she is. He begins by saying, "*How beautiful you are my love, how very beautiful!*" Then he spends 11 ½ verses telling her specifically about her eyes, her hair, her lips, her cheeks and on and on. It's wise and vital to speak words of affirmation of love to our spouse and the important people in our life. Being specific is more helpful than being general. Saying something about someone's eyes, or how a particular article of clothing looks on them, or how they've done their hair, these are things people enjoy hearing. Recently a man who's not part of our church asked to talk with me about his marriage. He emphasized that he loved his wife and kids and wasn't going to do anything foolish or stupid, but things aren't the same, now that they're middle aged and not in their 20's anymore. Father time is undefeated and there are some things we can't

do anything about, but there are things within our control. He asked for my advice, and I shared a few things including the value of walking together which is good for us physically and a way to talk and share which enhances a feeling of closeness. I also suggested that anytime his wife wore something he thought was flattering, that he should tell her how great she looked. He confessed he was more in the habit of speaking when he didn't like something than saying something positive. I strongly encouraged him to flip that and to speak words of affirmation and love whenever he could. Human nature is human nature. If someone you love and care about tells you how wonderful you look when you wear something, are you more or less likely to wear it or something like it more often? Of course you are. One of the things I tell couples when I have premarital conversations with them is to keep pursuing your spouse in love for the rest of your life, because if you don't, someone else will. Starry eyed couples about to get married don't often appreciate me saying that, but it's true. You need to keep pursuing one another in love whether you've been married for one year or thirty or fifty or more. Speak words of affirmation and love that emphasize and celebrate your partner's unique qualities, gifts, and strengths. Express admiration and gratitude for your spouse regularly, using affirming and loving words to build them up (Proverbs 18:21). While the bridegroom is describing how beautiful his bride is, what is the bride doing? I imagine she's doing a second thing that helps any marriage or relationship.

2. Practice Active Listening

Part of how we show love and faithfulness is by listening attentively to our partner or anyone else without interrupting or formulating responses prematurely (James 1:19). This demonstrates respect and value for their perspective. I'm sure it wasn't too difficult for the bride to listen and not interrupt as the bridegroom shared all that he loved and appreciated about her and how sweet her love was to him. Practicing active listening is more important and more difficult when someone isn't telling us how wonderful we are, which leads to a third practice which is highlighted in 1 Corinthians.

3. Be Patient and Kind in Conflict

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a reminds us that **love is patient and kind**. During disagreements, remain calm, avoid harsh words, and approach the conversation with a spirit of reconciliation rather than defensiveness (Ephesians 4:2-3). In times of conflict, it can be easy for all of us to get defensive or to feel attacked, yet often it's only people who truly care about us who will tell us things we need to hear, reflect on, and possibly address or change. As difficult as it can be to be patient or kind, when our heart is racing and our blood pressure is rising, that's precisely when we need to be patient and kind rather than irritable, resentful, or insisting on our own way.

Conflicts, misunderstandings, and disagreements are part of all relationships so how we handle them is important. That means speaking words of affirmation and love, practicing active listening, being patient and kind and using words that heal and build trust. We speak the truth, but we do so in love striving to make it clear we have the other person's best interest at heart. These behaviors are beneficial in all our relationships including in a marriage,

Song of Songs uses the imagery of **a locked Garden** to describe the purity and exclusivity that should characterize a marriage. This garden is a sacred sanctuary of love, intimacy, and divine blessing. The Hebrew word for garden ["gan" (גן)] suggests a place of delight and protection, reinforcing the idea of marriage as a sacred and exclusive union. The whole book of Song of Songs reminds us that sexuality, when expressed within the bounds of marriage, is something to be celebrated as a gift from God. It echoes the creation mandate of Genesis 1:28 which says, *"God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'"*

Nurturing the Garden of Your Marriage – four things to do

Protect Your Garden: Just as a garden needs protection from all kinds of intruders to flourish, a marriage also needs boundaries. Guard your heart, your eyes, and your actions to maintain the exclusivity of your marital bond.

Cultivate Variety: The diverse array of plants and spices mentioned in Song of Songs, *"an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, ¹⁴ nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all*

chief spices,” reminds us that marital love is not one-dimensional, but a rich tapestry of experiences, emotions, and pleasures. It encompasses physical attraction, emotional connection, intellectual stimulation, and spiritual unity. Like the diverse plants in a garden nurture these different aspects of your relationship.

Center Your Marriage on Christ: Remember that the ultimate fulfillment of this imagery is in Christ's love for His church. Let Christ's sacrificial love be the model for your marital love.

Keep the Waters Flowing: In the garden of love there is (4:15) *"a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon."* Water is essential for life and for a good garden, and in this garden of love, it flows abundantly. The fountain, well, and streams represent the life-giving nature of marital love. Just as water refreshes and sustains a garden, so love nourishes and sustains a marriage. The "well of living water" may also remind us of Christ's words to the Samaritan woman (John 4:14), suggesting that a God-centered marriage can be a source of spiritual refreshment. One of the ways we keep the water flowing is by using what Gary Chapman calls the Five Love Languages. In his book, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (1992) Chapman outlines five ways to express and experience love. They are **physical touch, words of affirmation, gift-giving, acts of service, and quality time together**. These ways of expressing love can be done appropriately in all our relationships and friendships.

The final line of our passage is a joyous exhortation to celebrate love. ***"Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love!"*** (5:1b) While this is the voice of the bridegroom inviting others to rejoice in their marriage, it can also be seen as God's approval and blessing on marital love. This "garden of love" that we've explored today is a picture of what every marriage can be when rooted in God's love and nurtured according to God's wisdom. It's a sanctuary of intimacy, a wellspring of joy, and a testimony to the world of God's goodness and grace. The same ways of communicating and behaving that make for a thriving garden of love in marriage also enrich our relationships with our family and friends. As a song says, ***"What the world needs now is love, sweet love, that's the only thing, that there's just too little of."***

Questions for Discussion

1. Proverbs 3:3 describes binding steadfast love and faithfulness around your neck. How do love and faithfulness contribute to building trust and respect in marriage and in all relationships?
2. Which qualities of love listed in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a are most challenging for you to practice consistently? Why?
3. How does the bridegroom's admiration for his bride's beauty in Song of Songs chapter 4 reflect the importance of verbal affirmation in a relationship? How can couples practice this today? How can friends provide this kind of affirmation and encouragement?
4. What does the imagery of a "locked garden" and "sealed fountain" in Song of Songs 4:12 signify about purity and exclusivity in marriage? How can couples apply this concept to protect and nurture their relationship?
5. According to Gary Chapman, there are five distinct love languages: physical touch, words of affirmation, gift-giving, acts of service, and quality time. How does being aware of our own needs as well as those of our spouse, or family members or friends help us to express love appropriately?
6. In Song of Songs 5:1 the bridegroom invites their friends to "*eat, drink, and be drunk with love.*" What does this celebration say about God's view of marital love? How can couples cultivate a culture of joy and celebration in their relationship?