

# Dump Your False Gods: Relationships

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Genesis 29:12-30

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Most of you will not be surprised to hear I'm a big fan of loving relationships. Of appropriate relationships—intimate and fun and fierce and steadfast and true. God has not created any of us to live alone.

Nor will you be surprised to hear that human relationships make great false gods, since false gods are simply good gifts from God which we pervert by elevating into the place in our lives where God alone needs to be. When we cease to trust in the living God, we will try to fill the vacuum with just about anything: socialism or capitalism, psychotherapy or meditation or bluegrass music or crystal meth or heroin or Hitler. But friends and lovers make especially effective idols. They can go to movies with us and talk and listen and hug.

I We tend to make friends and lovers into saviors.

We tend to look for love in the wrong places. The poets and songsters know all about this, and we keep listening because somehow it's true. In the Broadway show "Bewitched" one of the women admits she knows full well the man she's fallen for is a loser who will only bring her heartache and grief but sings anyway, "I'm wild again, beguiled again, a simpering, whimpering child again."

So many people are willing to settle for just about any kind of romantic relationship rather than to remain without, or alone. Many are willing to have just about anyone tell them they are someone, they have value, their thoughts and feelings are important. We all need to know who we are; we crave affirmation and acceptance at a deep and genuine level. God has created us for deep relationship.

Many in our culture keep buying into what M. Scott Peck calls "the myth of romantic love." People keep hoping to "fall in love," hoping that something gloriously emotional and dramatic and sexual and essentially passive will just happen to them, or keep happening to them. After all, it doesn't take any discipline to daydream. You don't have to be discriminating: you can fall in love with someone you barely know, and whose character you don't even. It doesn't take any concerted effort to pursue the path of spiritual growth if you're pretty sure your soulmate is already perfect and doesn't need any—and lately, around him or her, come to think of it, you've been feeling pretty darned perfect yourself.

This feeling of being in love is indeed powerful. Nature's incredible internal fireworks may be God's trickery to

get two adults to commit to marriage and to creating a family—something we would be otherwise extremely reluctant to do in the sober light of, say, a kindergarten classroom you're in for the parent/teacher conference.. (I am not so much an old fuddy-duddy as to decry being in love. It's just that what goes up must come down, and fixating on this feeling gets a lot of people into serious trouble. (Jacob was one; we'll come to him shortly.)

This expectation that it's all about being and remaining "in love" ruins a lot of romantic relationships and marriages. Given enough months or years, what goes up must come down, or at least settle down so you can both start getting to work on time. The initial blastoff of a romance—the hormonal rocketfuel injected straight into the heart (to mix metaphors horribly) is a terrific motivator—but when the fireworks begin to simmer down or wear off is, in some respects, when the work of genuine love begins. Love is work: you choose to love someone, and in loving someone you choose to invest yourself in his or her spiritual growth. You put up with an awful lot, and you learn a lot and give a lot and share a lot and grow a lot and pray a lot and thank God a lot. Great passions tend to wax and wane over time in a mature relationship, and it would be foolish not to welcome and relish them when they come. It would be more foolish to assume that something has gone wrong when they fade, or that this overwhelming feeling is the goal. This exciting feeling is a kind of fuel the Holy Spirit would use to help us keep living toward the goal.

It's obvious that we're a lot more apt to try to find a human savior to fill our emptiness when we're feeling empty. This was my strategy before my first marriage. I had been through a lot. I felt I had failed on a grand scale, and I was feeling very isolated. I was not part of any circle of friends or any faith family. I was not praying every day. In retrospect I was in no shape to get married to anyone in 1981 (come to think of it, God Himself would have had His hands full putting me back together, "saving me," at that point.) Asking my first wife to marry me seemed like a good idea at the time. Alas, she turned out not to be God. (Some days I'm not sure I've learned very much since my divorce in 1984, and some days I'm not sure I've practiced very well what I have learned. What I am sure is that I learned to choose really well the second time.)

It's very natural, when we feel empty or lonely inside, to

try to make friends or lovers into saviors. This is a spiritual issue, which the short story writer Katherine Mansfield (by no means a Christian) grasps as she describes the dilemma created by modern and sophisticated and educated people, like herself, who no longer believe there is any divine Savior: “It seems to me there is a great change since people like us believed in God. God is now gone for all of us. Yet we must believe; and not only that—we must carry our weakness and our sin and our devilishness to somebody. I don’t mean in a bad, debasing way. But we must feel that we are known, that our hearts are known, as God once knew us. Therefore love between lovers has to be not only human but divine. Their love is their religion...but ah, it is no good.” It’s no good expecting human friends or lovers to offer us what God alone can give.

II We tend to make friends or lovers into saviors. But following a human savior will eventually turn you into a slave and ruin your life.

In the account we just heard, Jacob is literally running for his life, and figuratively running on empty. He’s vulnerable. His father always liked his brother Esau better, and his mother Rebekah who liked him better is now far away. Jacob, having tricked his brother and fearing fatal retribution, has now fled several hundred miles to his mother’s relatives. And his uncle Laban sees him coming... “What could I pay you to look after my flocks?” he asks Jacob.

“Rachel!” is all he wants.

Why? The Hebrew text makes this all a lot more clear—but it’s a very basic story. Jacob is a male. (Notice we didn’t hear anything about her character, somehow.) It says she was beautiful, and she also had a figure to knock his socks off. She was hot! Jacob was willing to work seven years for her—an outrageous price, four times the going rate for a nice bride—presumably because he was so empty. Lovesick, willing to be exploited, overwhelmed by his sexual desire for her. I suspect he’s thinking something like, “she is incredible: if only I had her, my problems would be over and it would fix everything in my sorry life.” Jacob might have been a creature of the 21st Century in this respect, loading all his deepest needs for meaning and transcendence and validation onto one romantic hope—when he barely knows her.

When we are so needy we are easily taken advantage of—and Uncle Laban is not one not to notice this. He gets seven years of hard work out of Jacob—and even then he pulls a “bait and switch.” But he was crafty. When Jacob had offered to work the seven years to have Rachel,

Laban had not totally agreed. He equivocated: “I’ll agree, it would be better that you should have her than some other guy.” Jacob heard what he wanted to hear. He heard, “she’s all yours!”

After seven years the wedding night finally comes—Jacob is one excited guy—but after all the drinking and merrymaking and behind all those veils in the dark, in the light of morning his new bride turns out to be not Rachel the hot one but Leah, her older sister—the unattractive one who was used shamelessly. (The Old Testament, by the way, portrays polygamy and the low value placed upon women in many instances. But it never condones these customs—instead, it tells us the dysfunction and misery which follow these cruel norms. For example there will always be bitterness between these two sisters; Leah is jealous of Rachel because Jacob loves her but Rachel’s jealous of Leah because she keeps having the sons Rachel cannot. Their sons, and those of their maids, which only make matters worse, are Joseph and the other eleven who want to murder him out of jealousy. The complications keep playing out through the generations. The generations keep sinning and God keeps saving—even back then.)

Jacob is caught in Laban’s trap; he meekly offers to work yet seven more years. He’s acting like an addict; he’ll do anything to get what he needs—a savior; someone to tell him he’s OK. He is enslaved by his vision. Like an older man who divorces his wife, thinking his younger secretary will help him feel like a man. Like the young woman who attracts guys so easily she eventually begins to feel she is less of a woman, incomplete, if she doesn’t have one. She ends up being abused, enslaved. Like a husband who so fears losing or upsetting his wife he walks on eggshells and compromises himself, becoming enslaved. Our fears and our emptiness of spirit make us vulnerable, make us addicts to the hope which love holds out. Addicts make foolish choices.

Leah is even more tragic; if anything her emptiness exceeds Jacob’s. Her younger sister Rachel is a knockout; it says Leah is ugly to look at. Her father gives her away as bait because he can’t sell her and doesn’t want her; her husband is deceived and he doesn’t want her either. She is terribly needy, so she steps right into this nightmare.

You’ve heard the old expression, “Men give love to get sex; women give sex to get love.” There’s some truth to it; Jacob chooses a typically male response to meet his inner need—“if only I can get a sexy woman everything will be OK.” Leah chooses a typically female response. She wants to win his heart. “If only I can get him to love me, everything will be OK.” (Good strategy? What do you think?) She bears three baby boys. Maybe that will

do it. The first she names “Reuben,” or “affliction”... “surely now, when he sees how unhappy I am, when he sees my affliction, my husband will love me.” Her third she names “Levi” or “attached”... “surely now that I’ve borne him three sons, he will feel attached to me.” She is so desperate to be loved. She, too, is like an addict—helplessly pouring her hope and her self-respect into what will ruin her life. [For some of these insights I am again indebted to Timothy Keller and his book *Counterfeit Gods*.]

III Human saviors will enslave you and ruin your life. The true Savior will set you free to love better and will make you whole.

In the chaos of this drama, the only character who does anything very hopeful turns out to be Leah. She appears to turn from the fantasy; her fourth baby she names without reference to her feelings or her husband. She had been calling out to God in her distress. She senses God hears her prayer, and she when this fourth son is born she says “this time I will praise the LORD” and names him “Judah” (the word for “Praise.”) A new strategy! For the first time she appears to be taking her hopes off her husband. Jacob and Laban have stolen her life—but by turning to the living God to meet her deepest needs, she receives it back again.

What do you do when you feel like you’re running on “empty” and your present life-strategy isn’t working for you and God seems far away? One strategy is simple and popular. Blame your disappointments on those around you and move on to find new people and circumstances. (The way of exchanging one set of idols for another, and the pattern of addiction.) Another is to blame yourself—“It’s all my fault, and I’ll never have a worthwhile life. I’ll never be happy.” (The way of self-loathing.) The third is the one Leah chooses—the way to hope and wholeness. Reorient your focus more single-mindedly on the God who hears and answers your prayers.

Only God in Christ has shoulders broad enough and a heart loving enough to know who we are and to come to us and to replace our insatiable longing with His salvation—His wholeness. He comes to the Leahs—the unloveable or unloved—and says “I will love you. My grace is sufficient for you.” He comes to those who are not married, who have maybe lost their spouse—and says “I will be your Bridegroom; I will be Husband to the husbandless and Father to the fatherless.” To those who are married He also comes: “I am your Savior; you don’t need to place the weight of your expectations and hopes and needs to be OK on your wife, on your husband.”

Trust in Me and I will set you free to love those nearest to you more, not less.

The point of dumping this false god of inappropriate relationship is not to love your friends and spouses less—but more. Trusting in Jesus more allows you to love others more. When we love too needy, too clingy, too controlling, too detached, we only push away our loved ones.

When you know and experience how God loves you and God alone meets your deepest needs for meaning and transcendence and hope you are finally free to recognize your mate as God’s perfect gift to you, rather than as one who constantly disappoints you because he doesn’t meet your needs. Rather than as one you can never risk upsetting because you think you need his or her approval more than God’s. Your job is not to seek after that old rush of “feeling in love” but to keep investing yourself in your mate’s spiritual growth and welfare—and your own. (Then see what feelings might come when you keep giving thanks to God and you keep praying for the growth of your mate. Whether you still feel like it or not.)

Keep trusting your mate’s good motives even when it doesn’t make sense to you. Women: when in a heated discussion your husband starts to withdraw and go silent on you it does not mean he doesn’t love you or he doesn’t want to work on the relationship. He’s loving you the best way he knows how. He just can’t deal with the stress of the moment and he does not trust that anger could be positive. Men: when your wife keeps coming after you, getting more and more frustrated or even angry it does not mean she hates you or she is your enemy. To her it means she’s committed to bringing her energy, and taking the risk of getting the relationship all straightened out, everything clean, so she can love you even more all over again. Just because you’re calm does not mean she trusts that everything’s OK between you. She does not. Trust that she’s trying to love you, even when the evidence, to you, is totally to the contrary. (By the way it’s a dumb strategy for us men to simply stonewall our wives and leave it at that, and for you women to start angry arguments with your husbands. But dumb strategy is not the same as hateful motive.)

Strive to see your mate as God sees her. See someone dearly beloved by God who has had some deep fears and hurts and more than a few rough days recently. What are her fears and concerns and hopes? Strive to see him not as someone who chooses not to communicate with you but as someone who naturally recovers from stress by recharging at home at night, often in silence, so he can go out and do it all over again for you and the family tomorrow. Trust that God has given you your mate yes,

for your delight, but also for your refining and learning patience. Keep holding him or her up in prayer.

Married or unmarried: keep choosing to love one another—when you feel like it and when you don't. Keep praying for one another—when you feel like it and when you don't (An addict moves on when he feels like it, only to repeat the cycle elsewhere and damage his own and other peoples' lives.) Keep remembering to fear the Lord more than your mate's response.

Use your imagination responsibly. The enemy wants you to keep rehearsing in delicious detail the slights you have received and the egregious sins of your spouse. Don't play that CD even a single time. Use your imagination to give thanks. For what are you grateful? What is he doing right? Where is she making an effort to do things differently? The enemy wants you to think your marriage, your friendships, are a "zero sum game." The more you give, the less you have. Wrong: keep praying, and the more you give in obedience to God the more the Spirit keeps bringing. "God is love;" [1 John 4:8] God is the infinite Source. If I am running out or burning out I'm doing something wrong. (These principles pertain where both partners are relatively honorable and where they are enjoying or willing to work toward a genuine marriage rather than a sham one. Things are very different when the marriage is already finished, or when any of "the three 'a's'" are in play: adultery, abuse, or addiction.)

Sisters and brothers in Christ: you don't have to find or create a human savior: the real Savior loves you. You do not need to be needy or vulnerable in any relationship. You do not need to ask of another person what she or he is not able to give you, and you do not need anyone else to help you tell you you're OK. You do not need to keep pushing away the ones you love.

"So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is...Set your minds on things that are above, not on things [or people] that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." [Col 3:1-3]

Genesis 29: 12-35

And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father. When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month.

Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman,

should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful.

Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me."

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her.

When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" Laban said, "This is not done in our country--giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, "Because the LORD has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me." She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also"; and she named him Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons"; therefore he was named Levi. She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD"; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing.