

MASTERING LOVE-Part 1

Week #1 of a 2-Week Series Inspired by the don Miguel Ruiz Book, "The Mastery of Love"

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So today we start a two-week series about love. About loving relationships. Love in our relationships. And I think we all know; it isn't always easy to stay loving in relationships. You know, it kind of reminds me of one of my favorite jokes. [Congregation laughs] It's an oldie, but a goodie! Here it comes!

So this married couple had a really, really bad fight and argument. And they were so upset after it that neither one wanted to talk to each other. They were giving each other the silent treatment. Two days go by; not a peep from either one, with no talking or speaking in sight.

On the third day, the husband remembers that he has to take a business flight at 6 a.m. the next morning, and he's got to get up at 4 a.m. And he has a really hard time getting up, even with an alarm that early. He needs his wife's help. So, not wanting to be the first one to speak -- and needing her help -- he writes her a note that says, "Please wake me at 4 a.m. to catch an important flight for an important meeting." And he put it on her night table, where she'd see it.

And then the next morning he wakes up at 6 a.m., and he's missed his flight. And he is ticked and upset that his wife didn't wake him up. And before he could go to find her, he found a note on his side on the bed that said, "Wake up! It's 4 o'clock."

[Congregation laughs and applauds] And so, um [Laughs]

So how many people would agree that relationships are sometimes challenging, difficult and even frustrating? Anybody agree with that? And who would also agree that relationships can be wonderful, nurturing and fulfilling? Amen to that, as well!

So my question for you is: Are you a master of love? Or how many people would like to be more masterful in your expression and experience of love? Okay; about five or six of us. That's pretty good! [Laughs]

In his book, *The Mastery of Love*, don Miguel Ruiz says that we are all masters. And the reason we are masters is: Every one of us has the power to create our lives and everything in it. We create ourselves, he says, and we create our personalities. And we particularly create who we believe we are. Because who we believe we are really impacts all areas of our lives.

Sometimes some of us believe we're victims. Some believe that we are successful. Some believe that we aren't good enough or unworthy. Some believe that we're bad in relationships. Some believe that we're lucky in love. Some believe that we're happy. Some believe that we're lonely or that we're shy or that we're beautiful or that we're insecure. The fact is that we create our beliefs, and especially the belief of who we are. And that really guides and attracts so many of the experiences and relationships in our lives.

He gives this example. There's a child and there's some problem or situation that isn't working out well. The child gets angry. Somehow the problem seems to go away, and they get what they want. And they see that. And then it happens again. Problem; anger; resolved - they get what they want. And they begin to, what he says, is they begin to believe that about themselves, and begin to master anger as their "go to" response and one of their tools of how they live life.

And he said we create, practice and master all kinds of things like jealousy or self-rejection or feelings of sadness or unworthiness. He said all of the suffering and all the drama in our lives are all a creation from ourselves that we have practiced and mastered. And it's for all things, not just the challenging things. It's for all things: our level of happiness and success, and also love. That we have created and practiced and mastered whatever level of love we think we're worthy of.

So I want you to think of your main relationship or your relationships, and think about the amount of love in your life. And I bet every one of us probably would like to experience more love, or a greater level of love. And the good news is that -- since we created, practiced and developed a level of mastery - - we can actually recreate and practice higher levels of love, and move to mastering greater levels of love in our lives.

So that's what we're going to look at over the next two weeks. Today we're going to look at seven practices that we can have to increase the level of love to move to the greater experience of mastering love.

So the first step in our increasing love in our relationships is that we have to **WORK ON OURSELVES**. You know, when we want a relationship to get better or improve or be happier, we usually think ... It usually means that we want the other person to change. You know, we want the other person to improve; we want the other person to get better; we want the other person to wake up and get with it. [Congregation laughs] AKA, we want the other person to do exactly what we want them to do and be the way we want them to be!

And one of the reasons I think we want the other person to change is that, at some level, I think we believe that the people in our lives -- and particularly our most important relationship -- that person is there to make us happy. That at some level, I think we're thinking, *"Hey! You are supposed to complete me, and right now I'm not feeling so complete, so you really need to do a better job on your end to make this work."*

And so don Miguel Ruiz says that happiness can only come from within ourselves and is the result of our own love. You know, partners certainly have a role to play; there's no question. But with the belief that that person has to change being the necessary answer for our happiness and our relationship to work is not a winning proposal at all.

If we truly, truly want to experience more love in our relationship, we have to work on ourselves. We have to look within. That if we are feeling a lack of love or stuck or in conflict or disconnected, it is a reflection of something within ourselves: some fear or wound that is in ourselves that needs healing. That needs acceptance. That needs to be released and transformed in some way.

And to find out what's going on with us that's blocking us or preventing us from experiencing higher levels of love, we have to look at some of the patterns in our lives. What are some of the common struggles we have in relationships? Or what are the similar arguments we keep having or experiencing of getting hurt or whatever else? And looking at patterns of things like how we respond ... like, maybe shutting down or pushing away. Or even running away.

And the thing is: We need to be honest with ourselves about what's really going on with us, and what some of those patterns are. And to look toward ourselves, and not others, and see what our role is and how we're participating and perpetuating these situations.

And once we get clear on that -- working on ourselves -- is to take it to God. That we really need to open our hearts to feel God's love and allow God's love to cleanse and to refresh and to renew and to heal and transform us so that we can get to a place where we feel whole in God's love. Where we feel a sense of wholeness with our own love; that that love within fills us by ourselves. Because the more we

take our hearts and our love to God and open to ourselves, that is the only way we can increase our capacity to give and receive love in our lives.

You know, there's an abundance of love within us and around us that's available. And when we do this, more love comes. And it wasn't like it wasn't there before! It's just we were blocking it in the ways that we have fears or woundedness that hold us back.

You know, one of the things -- if we're really serious about increasing the level of love in our relationship -- is to not be looking at our partner as the automatic knee-jerk reaction of how things can get better. Because it really is about how we create love; how we practice love; and how we master higher and newer levels of love.

So if we want to master love -- we want more love in our lives -- we need to work on ourselves and cultivate and connect with the love within ourselves.

The second one is that we need to **PAY ATTENTION**. You know, Linda and Charlie Bloom, in their blog, "Stronger at the Broken Places," said more marriages die of neglect and a lack of attention than of irreconcilable differences. Like everything else in life, every relationship needs to be nurtured. It needs to be given attention. Somebody said that in life you're either expanding or contracting; we're either thriving or we're dying. And in relationships, attention is an important that needs to be paid.

These guys are saying that sometimes we spend more money and maintenance on our cars than working on our relationships. That we'd never think about driving 50,000 on our car before an oil change, yet we can sometimes go for months without saying, "*I love you.*" Or having a heart-to-heart talk or taking time just to spend one-on-one with one another. Or having a fun getaway together.

The thing about attention is two things. One is to pay attention and just notice what's going on with our partner. Are they tired? Are they looking stressed? Sometimes we are in the same house and the same place, and we're not tuned in. And so sometimes just paying attention of what's going on and how things are is important.

And the other one is to give our attention. Like, one of the greatest gifts we can give someone in life is to give them our undivided attention. Because to give someone our attention means that we're present; that we're interested; that we're engaged; that we want to hear and listen to what's going on in their lives.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi said, "*Whatever you put your attention on will grow stronger in your life.*" So if we put our attention on our love and on our relationship that it will grow into greater levels of happiness and love.

The third one to increase the love in relationships is to **ADDRESS OUR PROBLEMS WHEN THEY COME UP**. You know, most of us -- when it comes to problems and particularly in relationships -- we'd rather kind of put it off; put it to the side; sweep it under the rug; hope it just magically gets better on its own. But the truth is: Most difficult problems in a relationship get harder over time, rather than get easier. You know, sometimes just acknowledging these difficult things earlier -- even if they're uncomfortable -- is much healthier than waiting. Because things can fester! Things can get even worse when we ignore or pretend.

Somebody said, "*Pain denied is pain prolonged.*" And so, even if it's uncomfortable, we need to address these things. And it's easier than we think! Telling someone the truth in a way that's not shaming or blaming or disrespectful can often bring couples closer together ... Individuals in any kind of relationships better. But when we put it off, it can actually create more distance; more disconnect; and more bitterness.

I read something that really surprised me. And it said the average couple has already been in trouble for six years before they seek marriage counseling. I don't know; does that sound surprising? But the point is that putting things off is really not a healthy thing. It's good and important to work on it together. But it's also good and important to sometimes see, when it's not working, that we might need some help to try and navigate through some of the challenges to get to a place of healing and greater connection.

The next one is to **LEARN TO FORGIVE**. Number four. Inevitably in any life, in any relationship -- work or more intimate relationships -- someone's going to say something that's hurtful. Someone's going to say something that's unkind or insensitive. And nothing erodes a relationship quicker than holding a grudge and being resentful and feeling blame and bitterness. And it's poisonous! And it can be very, very destructive in any relationship.

And even though there are always going to be disappointments or hurts or irritations, having the willingness and the desire to forgive; to release; and to heal those hurts and upsets and emotions is a vital and important thing. And sometimes we think, *"Oh, I'll never be able to forgive!"* or *"How do I forgive?"* The truth is, the number one thing about forgiveness, I always say, is: Are you willing? Are you willing to forgive? Are you willing to let go of that pain? And are you willing to have an intention to be healed? And are you willing to allow God to help you heal your heart? To allow God to help dissolve and remove that pain and that bitterness?

You know, I absolutely believe that forgiveness is one of the greatest acts of love. It is an act of self-love. Of saying, *"I'm not going to keep punishing myself with anger and resentment and hate. Instead, I want to choose to be loving to myself and forgive, so I can experience peace. So I can experience a greater sense of happiness and joy."*

And it's the same in the relationship! Forgiveness is an act of love! To be able to let go of that stuff to feel a sense of healing and wholeness so that the relationship can move on in the healthiest way possible.

So number five in increasing love in our relationship is: **TAKE TIME TO PLAY AND HAVE FUN**. Sometimes we're so busy we don't take time for ourselves. We don't take time for each other. And just doing anything, like hiking and biking. Or doing yoga; or working out; or going to a play or a concert or a comedy club. Or taking cooking lessons or wine tasting or dancing. Or going to the spa and having a massage and a mani/pedi together. [Congregation laughs] Or something! Whatever it is you think might be fun!

I know some couples do "date nights" and stuff. And these things are vital and important! You know, from the grind and stress of all the work and responsibilities, it's important to plan out time. Personal time; connecting time. To find that childlike joy; to find that love and playfulness in the relationship again. That's number five.

Number six is the **WILLINGNESS TO SHARE YOUR VULNERABILITY**. You know, being vulnerable, for most of us, is a little scary. You know ... *"If I share this much of myself, will I regret it? Will I be embarrassed? Will they think I'm foolish?"* But on the other side of vulnerability is connection and intimacy and a closeness and an understanding that can bring people closer and experience deeper levels of love and understanding of each other.

And the thing about the vulnerability ... it could be anything! It could be anything that's going on in your life right now. It could be something that happened in the past. It could be some regret. It could be some secret dream or desire that you have. Something happy. Something sad. It doesn't matter! What does matter: it is something that is vital and important to you. Something sacred to you that you want to share openly with the person in your life. The power of vulnerability is amazing!

The example I want to give you is actually in my relationship with my dad. My dad was a very serious guy. And I always say he had a "man face." At 11, he looked like a man. And not just any man; a serious man! [Congregation laughs] He just looked like that! You know, my dad ... I only knew him as a serious guy. He was fun sometimes, but vulnerable is not something I would ever assume about my dad. He always had two jobs; he had 10 kids. He was working hard! You know, he didn't have a lot of "warm fuzzies" oozing off him like my mom.

And so there were three incidents in my dad's life where I remember him being vulnerable that really caught me by surprise and amazed me and made a difference to me. When I was four years old, my father had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized for a while. And he had electro-shock therapy, and he was away from the family for a while. And so then I was four. And I had heard about something like that, but when I was in my mid-20 we were sitting around and, out of the blue, my father talks about his hospitalization. Brings it up out of the blue! And what it was like to be away from the family. What it was like to go through that experience.

And I'd never seen my dad as anything except strong. And so to see him vulnerable and sharing about his process was something that really struck me. And I didn't see him as weak; it actually helped me understand him, and I appreciated and realized all that he went through. And it just made me feel closer and more connected to him. It was an amazing experience.

Another one was: He shared an experience of when he was kid. He was about 13 or 14. His father had a little store. And one of his customers called a bag of fruit; they're called balatas. They're from Latin America. Let's call them cherries here: Caribbean cherries. And they were kind of rare and really delicious and a little expensive. And so my dad, seeing this, thought, "*Why not just take one?*" He took one. And he took two. And he took three or four or five. He was loving these things and enjoying it! And he thought to himself, "*You know what? I'm going to get in trouble for taking a few of these, so I might as well get in trouble and eat all of them.*" [Laughs with congregation]

And with my dad, we were howling! All the kids were howling at him and the way he told the story. But again, we felt closer and connected to this serious man who was a great provider.

And then the last one was just a couple of years before he died. We bought this cassette recorder. And my sisters were talking into it, and we were playing around with it. And then they sang, "*Going to the chapel / gonna get married.*" Some song like that. And out of a little joke, they said, "Hey, Dad! Want to sing a song?" And he said, "Yes." My father gave a heartfelt rendition of "Strangers in the Night" that we couldn't even believe! [Congregation laughs]

In fact, he sang with ... The only other time I heard my father sing was "Happy Birthday." [Congregation laughs] I mean, that was the only thing. So I don't know where this came from! And we actually, as soon as he finished singing it, we pressed "Play" and listened to him sing it again on the recording. We were so moved and touched.

And so the one thing I want to say: Vulnerability is risky, but the payoff is incredible. Our willingness and our desire to share a piece of ourselves -- something sacred; something playful; something we dare not generally share -- is a vital and important thing to be closer in a relationship. I would say it's one of the -- of these seven things -- one of the most powerful to bring people closer together, and to feel more connection.

Because I bet -- in many relationships -- the people we're closest to; there are things we haven't shared with them. Things we want to share with them, but we hold ourselves back, because we're afraid to be vulnerable.

And the final one is to **CHERISH AND APPRECIATE THE PEOPLE IN OUR LIVES** and all of our relationships. You know, when people love us -- and they're always there for us -- it's easy to take them for granted, isn't it? They're kind of always there. They always seem happy. Everything seems Cool. But the fact is, everybody wants to feel cherished and appreciated. Nobody wants to feel that they're taken for granted.

And to feel cherished and appreciated means that you feel cared for. You feel valued. You feel affirmed. You feel nurtured. And it is such an important and powerful gift.

Do you know research shows that, when we express gratitude to someone, it triggers what they call "the love hormone" -- oxytocin -- in us that is responsible for helping us build connection and closeness and bonds between people.

You know, three of the most powerful things we could ever say: *"Thank you."* *"I appreciate you."* And, *"I'm grateful for you."* And grateful in all of those can be for all things, but especially in relationships! To express our gratitude and appreciation there is important.

Now, it's easier to appreciate and cherish someone for all the things we love about them! But it's a little harder to appreciate the things that are really different about them. But every single relationship -- no matter how much people love each other or how much we think we're similar -- there are always going to be differences. Differences in the way we communicate; our perspective. And those things have to be learned to be appreciated as well.

I bet some of you are either in a relationship or know of relationships where someone is a morning person and someone is a night owl. Someone is adventurous and daring; someone is a little more conservative. Someone is punctual; someone is always running late. Someone is really organized; someone is really disorganized. Anybody ever have that in your relationship? [Congregation laughs] Those are there for a reason! When they say opposites attract, it's for a reason! To help expand our capacity to love ... to love even though they don't do it the way we do it! You know, to appreciate and to cherish that there are different ways of doing things in life. And that person is in your life to love and celebrate you in those good ways, but show you differences to expand your capacity to love.

You know, I saw a quote and it said, *"Differences are inevitable, but conflict is optional."* [Congregation murmurs] So with differences, we need to learn how to appreciate them. How to respect -- how to honor -- even though it's different. Because that's all a huge part of deepening and expanding the level of love in our relationships and in our lives.

The greatest commandment is to love: Love God! Love others as we love ourselves! The Apostle Paul said, *"Love is the fulfilling of the Law."* Love is the deal! The thing we all want and need. And love is hard! It ain't easy! It challenges us and it stretches us every which way!

But guess what? We are creators! And we can create greater levels of love; practice those levels of love; and master those levels of love to feel greater levels of fulfillment.

So the seven things are:

- 1) Work on ourselves. Look inward first whenever anything's going on. See what might need to be healed and released. And expand God's love in our hearts.
- 2) Second is: Pay attention. Pay attention to what might be going on with the other person and then give your attention.
- 3) Three is: To address it sooner. Don't let it fester! Get help if you need it. Talk about it. Bring it out so it doesn't become a bigger problem.

- 4) Learn to forgive. Forgiveness frees us, heals us; it's an act of love.
- 5) Take time to have fun. Go do things together. Whatever you like to do, go do some stuff!
- 6) Share your vulnerability. Share a piece of yourself, even if it's risky, because I guarantee you, it will bring closeness and understanding.
- 7) And finally: Cherish and appreciate the things you love and adore about them, and learn to appreciate the things that are different about them.

Because they all help us experience greater levels of love. If we all want to have more love, we've got the power to create! We have the power to practice and master love.

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]

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