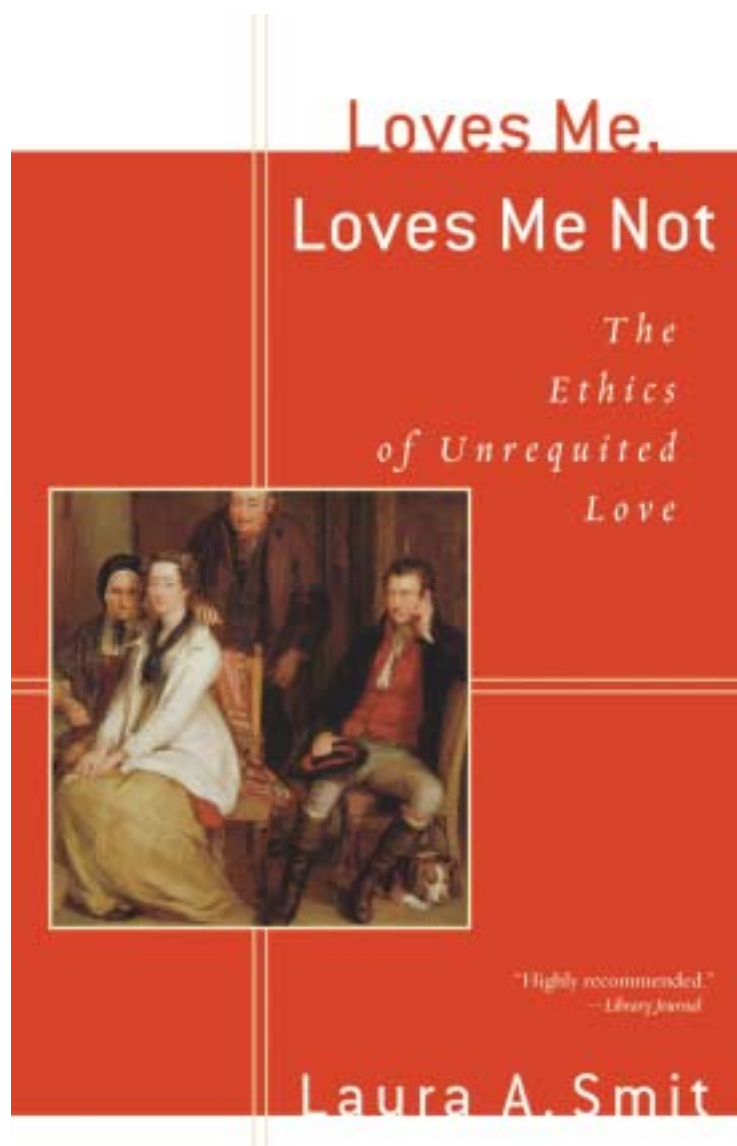


Discussion Guide for

*Loves Me, Loves Me Not:
The Ethics of Unrequited Love*
by Laura A. Smit



INTRODUCTION

1. As part of the introductions at the beginning of your first meeting, have each member of the group tell the story of a memorable break-up out of his or her experience. It doesn't need to be your own story; it may be the story of someone you know. Make sure to share whether you know the story from the perspective of the one who did the breaking up or the one who was broken up with. If you have more time in your meeting, you could ask everyone to give an example of each sort of story.

2. Smit says, "For many people, unrequited love is a bigger part of life than relationships." Do you think this is true? If the members of your group already know each other well, you may choose to personalize the question: Is it true for you?

3. Consider the quote from the book *He's Just Not That Into You* (found on pages 14 and 15), which suggests that a person is only experiencing real love if the feeling is mutual. Smit comments, "When we find ourselves in love with someone who does not return our feelings, friends and family are likely to be united in urging us to move on, to stop wasting time on this fruitless relationship, and instead to work at finding a meaningful (i.e. mutual) relationship." Have you ever encountered this attitude? Have you ever felt this way yourself? Smit says Christians must challenge this idea. Do you agree?

4. Look at the list of questions on pages 17 and 18. Are these questions that you've already thought about? How many of these questions have clear and obvious answers in your view?

5. What advice do you give to a friend who is experiencing unrequited love? to a friend who is trying to reject someone else's advances?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Play some of your favorite unrequited love songs, or ask group members to bring along their favorite break-up songs.

Watch several rejection scenes from your favorite romantic movies. As you watch the scenes, is your sympathy more for the one being rejected or for the one doing the rejecting?

CHAPTER 1: God's Nature

1. Share with each other your understanding of God's nature. How has God been presented to you by family, teachers, and preachers throughout your life? As a friend? As a powerful, distant force? Have you been taught to think of God as genuinely triune, or do you associate the word "God" with one member of the Trinity more than the others? Were any of your understandings about God's nature challenged in this chapter?

2. Have you ever questioned God's goodness during a time of suffering? during a time of heartbreak? What beliefs about God are assumed by such questioning?

3. The chapter begins with a quote from George Herbert about resting in God's love. Do you agree that God is *all* love? Does that make a difference when facing painful experiences?

4. On page 31, Smit says,

If you are living in a growing awareness of God's love and with a growing love for God, then you are oriented toward your proper end and your life is proceeding as it should, even if you are not married or in a romantic relationship. If you are deeply in love with someone who is also in love with you, but you have not placed that love in the context of God's love, then you are not oriented toward your proper end and your life is deeply disordered, no matter how happy you may appear or feel. The ultimate meaning of life derives from God's love for us, and that love is sufficient to make life meaningful.

Do you agree with this statement? What difference does this make in how you interpret your experiences of heartbreak? of loneliness? of romantic happiness?

5. Do you take the "soulmate" perspective or the "Dantean" perspective on God's involvement in romance? Whichever your perspective, do you think God ever causes people to fall in love?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Watch a movie (or selected scenes from a movie) that advocates the soulmate perspective, such as *Sleepless in Seattle* or *Serendipity*. Have you become more or less critical of this perspective since reading this chapter?

Read the scene from *The Last Battle* quoted on page 28. Discuss how this story might apply to experiences of heartbreak.

CHAPTER 2: God's Plan for Creation

1. On page 45, Smit says, "Part of our human design includes the ability to glimpse ultimate reality and beauty – indeed to glimpse God's very image – in the particular form of those we most love." Share ways in which this has been true in your life. Note that the examples need not involve romance (for example, many people find that the most overwhelming insight into God's image involves their children). Does love need to be mutual for this vision to occur?
2. On page 47, Smit says, "Romantic love is a good gift from God designed to support an even better gift: covenantal and committed marriages." Do you agree that romantic love is part of the creation order in this way? Do you agree that marriage is an even better gift than romantic love?
3. How can we decide when what's "natural" is something fallen that should be resisted versus when what's natural is part of God's design for us?
4. Do you believe that unrequited love could have occurred in a sinless world, or is it a result of the fall?
5. Have you ever experienced falling in love as the combination of involuntary inevitability and freedom described by Frankfurt (on pages 58-59)?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Watch the movie *Fiddler on the Roof* together, or at least some selected scenes. If you're short on time, just watch the well-known song "Do You Love Me?" What's the place of romance in the marriages portrayed in this movie? How has the place of romance changed in our society in the last 200 years? in your lifetime?

Look at the texts of some wedding hymns that are commonly sung in your church or in your tradition. What understanding of Christian marriage is reflected in these texts?

CHAPTER 3: God's Plan for the New Creation

1. Smit argues for a fairly high level of discontinuity between the Old Testament teaching on marriage/romance and the New Testament teaching on the same topic. Think of other examples of both continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, then discuss whether you think marriage belongs in the discontinuity category.

2. On page 64, Smit says, "The coming of Jesus changed the meaning of marriage and raised the possibility of celibacy, that is, intentional abstinent singleness." There are some examples of intentional abstinent singleness in the Old Testament; how does the example of Jesus differ from those examples? How does Smit claim that Jesus fulfills marriage? Do you agree with this claim?

3. In the contemporary church, there are people who argue that Jesus opened the door to acceptance of alternative forms of sexual expression (such as same-sex marriage) and that the trajectory of Christian history and revelation is toward more and more openness on such issues. Smit argues for a very different trajectory (p.67). Which argument makes most sense to you? What difference does this make for the life of the church?

4. On page 76, Smit summarizes Paul's teaching as a "transcultural, general principle," saying "we should opt for the state of life that is most conducive to being faithful to Christ." What if you think that marriage would be most conducive to being faithful to Christ, but the possibility of Christian marriage hasn't arisen in your life? What should you do then?

5. Smit makes reference to a church that taught a woman had no right to "deny fellowship" to a single male church member who asked her out. Have you ever encountered that idea? Smit argues that the burden of proof should go the other way. Do you agree?

6. The end of the chapter is about the need for a diverse community of Christians. How much of your life is spent with people unlike yourself? How many of your friends are people just like you and how many are in a significantly different life situation?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Watch the movie *My Brilliant Career* and talk about your reactions to Sybylla's romantic decisions.

Have group members imagine what their experience of heaven will be like (perhaps using drawing supplies) and then share their imaginings. Then discuss, paying particular attention to how personal relationships will function in heaven.

CHAPTER 4: Sin and Our Romantic Lives

1. In your experience, does sin typically express itself in different ways in men and women? Or are the differences between men and women in this regard not that important?
2. What sorts of codes for romantic behavior do you see among your friends and acquaintances? Are they similar to or different from the patterns described in this chapter? What codes or patterns do you think the church should encourage?
3. Discuss the concept of emotional modesty. Was this a new idea for you? How would our behavior change if we all embraced this concept?
4. Do you know anyone who keeps repeating a destructive romantic pattern? Is it appropriate to evaluate whether a relationship conforms to God's will based on its fruits?
5. How seriously should we take the prohibition against being unequally yoked? At what point in a relationship does this prohibition become relevant? Should it prevent an acquaintance from developing? a serious friendship? any romantic involvement? only marriage?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Watch the movie *Washington Square*, with an eye toward seeing examples of sin and destructive romantic patterns.

Look at the texts of some popular break-up songs. Without knowing who sings the song, could you tell whether it is sung by a man or a woman? Could most songs be sung equally well by either a man or a woman?

CHAPTER 5: Virtuous and Nonvirtuous Romance

1. On page 109, Smit argues that a virtuous Christian should be *inwardly* motivated rather than *externally* motivated. Does this distinction make sense to you? Do you agree that internal motivation is preferable?
2. Have you experienced the idea of different romantic leagues? Are there people you think are clearly out of your league? below your league? Should Christians challenge such thinking, or is it appropriate for people to be matched with people who are like them in this way?
3. How possible or desirable is it to retrain your patterns of romantic attraction?
4. Do you have a “shopping list” of requirements that you use when considering possible romantic relationships? Smit claims that such a list is inappropriate. Do you agree?
5. On page 133, Smit argues that “our romantic desires are not reliable indicators of godly behavior.” Do you agree?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Watch the 1955 movie *Marty*. Pay attention to the sense of romantic hierarchy in this movie and how it threatens genuine romance.

Listen to Tal Bachman’s song “She’s So High” (from the album *Tal Bachman*; also more recently covered by Kurt Nilsen). As you listen, think about your own reactions. Do you assume that the singer is suffering from low self-esteem? Or might the attitude expressed in this song be appropriate?

CHAPTER 6: Embodiment and Sexual Identity

1. At the beginning of this chapter, Smit says, "The communion of like minds is a wonderful thing, but if it is unaccompanied by physical attraction, it is a sign of friendship, not romance." Do you agree? What about online dating? or the sort of long-distance courtship that used to be conducted by letters? Is physical attraction a part of such experiences?
2. Smit argues that our culture both over-values and under-values the body. Which of these two problems seems dominant to you? Which is more of a temptation in your own thinking?
3. Have you encountered the idea that virginity is unnatural and shameful? Do you agree with Smit (on page 151) that it is more useful to focus on purity (which includes the inner life) rather than on virginity?
4. Is physical attraction or its lack a legitimate factor in a Christian's decisions about dating or marriage? This chapter includes arguments on both sides. What do you think?
5. At the end of the chapter, Smit challenges contemporary Christians to practice a more vigilant "custody of the eyes" when it comes to television and movie viewing. Do you find her challenge unrealistic? a good idea? not challenging enough?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Philip Turner's fine article is available online at:

<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9305/articles/turner.html>. It isn't very long and would make a fine piece of supplemental reading for this chapter.

Spend some time going through a recent copy of TV guide and/or your local newspaper's movie listings. If you were to practice the sort of custody of the eyes that Smit advocates, how much of this material would be off limits?

CHAPTER 7: Romance and Imagination

1. How have popular music, television, and movies influenced your expectations when it comes to romantic experience?
2. Have you ever had the experience of falling in love with an illusion? Or has anyone ever claimed to be in love with you without really knowing you at all? In your experience, how do people get over such imaginary love?
3. Throughout this chapter, Smit considers the good and bad ways that imagination can function in our romantic lives. Do you agree that imagination can function in both these ways? Can you think of examples of both sides of imagination from your own experience?
4. In the quote on page 179, Peter Kreeft talks about the danger of confusing "God is love" with "love is God." Have you encountered this confusion among your acquaintances? in the broader culture? Do you agree with Kreeft about the danger?
5. Consider the story of Thomas Merton with which Smit ends this chapter. Smit's conclusion from this story is, "We are particularly vulnerable to such self-deception when we spiritualize our sexual impulses" (p.182). Do you agree with her assessment of Merton's conduct?

Other Meeting Ideas:

The Star Trek episode referred to in this chapter is available on video. Watch it together – or just watch the portions pertaining to Geordi and Leah Brahms. Note her reaction when she discovers that he has been fantasizing about her and discuss whether her reaction is appropriate.

Take some time to describe your imaginary ideal person, then share the description with the group. Discuss how your imagination might hinder a real romantic experience. Is it possible to have such an explicit ideal without falling into the shopping list syndrome discussed in chapter 5, which commodifies romance?

CHAPTER 8: Rejecting Love

1. This chapter opens with a consideration of the cultural “script” for romance that suggests pursuit always wins in the end, that eventually the rejector is always persuaded to give in to love. Have you encountered this script? Do you agree with Smit that it is potentially destructive?
2. Have you ever encountered the sense of entitlement on the part of someone who is in love? Have you ever felt that your love for someone else entitled you to be loved in return?
3. On page 197, Smit gives examples of how some people avoid the awkward role of rejector by sabotaging their relationships, so that the other person ultimately has to do the rejecting. Have you ever seen someone end a relationship by sabotage, rather than by direct rejection? Have you ever done this yourself?
4. How should a Christian handle someone who refuses to take romantic rejection? How do we tell the truth in a way that’s both loving and not falsely encouraging?
5. Smit claims that “over time the script becomes clearer” (p.205). Has this been your experience?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Watch the scene from the 1994 version of *Little Women* in which Jo rejects Laurie. Whose side are you on as you watch? Are your sympathies more naturally with the one rejecting, or with the one pursuing?

Have two people role play a rejection scene, with one person playing a persistent and optimistic suitor, the other playing the rejector. Let other members of the group rotate into these roles as the role-players get stuck. Which role is more awkward? Which role is more sympathetic? Which role is easiest?

CHAPTER 9: Pursuing Love

1. At the beginning of this chapter, Smit talks about how love may sometimes elicit love in return. Do you know of anyone for whom this has happened, who has been drawn into love with someone else because that person loved him or her?
2. Do you have any experience with people who can only be in love with someone unattainable?
3. On page 219, Smit offers guidelines about when you should and shouldn't tell someone about your love. What do you think of these guidelines? Are they helpful?
4. When you are in love, do you talk about your feelings with your friends or not? Do you think that it is helpful or harmful to share your feelings widely? Is Smit's suggestion about prayer a helpful alternative, or is that idea just too idealistic?
5. Smit says, "Ultimately, it is an insult to the one we claim to love if we persist too long" (p. 222). Do you agree?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Watch the following scenes from the movie *Love Actually*: 1. Peter & Juliet's wedding, 2. Juliet seeing the footage that Mark shot at her wedding and Mark leaving his house, and 3. Mark appearing at Juliet's door with cue cards. Discuss whether or not Mark should have shared his feelings. How do you think his relationship with Peter and Juliet will be influenced in the future by the fact that he shared his feelings? (Note: I have a "clean" [i.e., edited] version of this movie, which is a wonderful thing. I do NOT recommend watching the entire unedited movie as part of your group meeting!)

Pick a version of *Pride and Prejudice* and either watch or read the scene in which Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth and the scene in which Mr. Darcy first proposes to Elizabeth. Compare and contrast the two. Is it realistic that Mr. Darcy eventually elicits Elizabeth's love in return?

CHAPTER 10: Aftereffects

1. Why do you think rejection in love so often turns to anger? Is this something that you've experienced?
2. On page 233, Smit says "sometimes we really are unworthy." Do you agree? Can romantic rejection spur us on to self-examination and self-improvement?
3. On pages 236-237, Smit says that when Christians react to the end of a romance by saying "God has someone else out there for you," this reaction is flawed for several reasons. Do you agree with her analysis here?
4. Smit suggests seven steps people can take to get over love. Do you find these steps helpful? Do you have other suggestions that have worked for you?
5. Smit also suggests that it's possible to find value in a continuing experience of unrequited love, which becomes of form of emotional poverty or emotional poverty. Do you agree that such an experience can be valuable?
6. The book ends by suggesting that unrequited love may be "a source of joy, an 'alien form' under which the gift of God comes to us" (p.248), which is one reason that it really is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Do you agree?

Other Meeting Ideas:

Ask people to bring in their favorite songs of love and/or heartbreak to share. How has this discussion group influenced the way you hear these songs?

There are very few examples in popular culture of love with open hands, but here is one: Wendell Berry's lovely novel *Jayber Crow* tells of a man who silently loves a married woman and who grieves to see that her husband is unfaithful. He decides that he will be faithful to her himself, giving up all other women and sacrificing himself for her as he can, without ever telling her of his love. He will be "married" to her in that he will not be free to marry anyone else, but he will not jeopardize her marriage to her husband. Read aloud pages 247-250 (from Part III, chapter 23, "The Way of Love") beginning with "It is a fearful thing..." and ending with "... God loves the world."