

Marriage Is God's Idea Commitment

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

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This morning we begin a new series looking at what God's Word has to say about marriage. If you are married, I hope this series will help to reinvigorate your marriage and your relationship with God. If you are considering marriage, I hope this series will help to prepare you for when you get married. Others of you who are not married may decide to stay that way after this series! For those of us who may have experienced a divorce, this series may help us understand what went wrong and help to avoid those mistakes again.

We are going to look at a passage found in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians which summarizes the Biblical perspective on marriage.

Ephesians 5:21-33

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²²Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- ³⁰for we are members of his body. ³¹"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³²This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

As you heard this passage how did you react? There were probably many of you who had some very negative reactions. When we read this passage, we tend to "zero in" on two phrases: "wives submit to your husbands" and "the husband is the head of his wife." When we focus on those two phrases, we get distracted from the powerful principles that are in the rest of this passage. It is those other principles which help us to understand what is meant by "submission" and "headship." So we are going to put those two concepts on the back burner in this series. We are going to deal with the other principles first and, then, in the last message in this series, we will deal with "submission" and "headship."

There are five defining principles of marriage we see in this passage: marriage as commitment, marriage as priority, marriage as friendship, marriage as mystery and the power of marriage. Today we will focus on marriage as commitment.

Paul quotes the passage from Genesis 2 where God created the relationship we call marriage. "A man shall leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife." The term "united" is a strong word which means "glued to" or "bound together." There is a big difference between a loose leaf notebook and a leather bound book. In a loose leaf notebook the pages are separated and can be easily removed and returned without damaging the notebook or the paper. If you tear out a page from a bound book you harm the book and the page. You cannot put it back together again. The binding has been compromised.

In marriage two people are bound together. They cannot be separated without doing harm to each other and to the marriage. That is because marriage is bound together by a covenant. A covenant is a binding, public and legal contract used in business, real estate and personal transactions. In Biblical times there were four aspects to every covenant:

1. At the beginning the parties were introduced to each other.
2. Then the stipulations of the contract were agreed upon. What is it that we are agreeing to do? What are our duties to each other?
3. Next follows a list of blessings that will come if the covenant agreement is kept. There is also a list of curses that will fall upon the party who violates the covenant.
4. Finally there is an oath or vow exchanged which publically ratifies the contract. A typical ratification would include both parties slaying an animal, cutting it into two halves and standing between the halves. They would look at the bloody carcasses of the animal and say to each other: "I vow to do this to you if you break our contract." It was a very sobering moment! This is serious business—life or death!

Since marriage is a covenant relationship, I wonder if we should include something like that ritual in our weddings? The bride and groom stand in the middle of the split carcass of an animal and say to each other, “you cheat on me and this is what will happen to you.” I wonder if it would decrease the divorce rate? It would probably increase the murder rate!

Even in Biblical times the covenant of marriage was not ratified with the slaying of an animal! But a marriage included all four of the key elements of a covenant:

1. The parties were introduced to each other. In Biblical times fathers arranged the marriages of their children. These arrangements may have begun as early as the birth of their children. One father would say to another, “When our children grow up, I want my son to marry your daughter.” Typically males and females did not interact much growing up. It was likely that they never met each other until their parents decided it was time for them to marry—usually in their early teens. The father would take the prospective groom to the household of the prospective bride. The bride and groom would be brought into the room and introduced to each other.
2. The stipulations of the contract were agreed upon. The father of the groom would offer a dowry for the bride. Sometimes it was an amount of money, or crops or livestock or services. Jacob agreed to work seven years in exchange for Rachel as his wife. Typically this amount had to be paid before the marriage.
3. A list of blessings that will come if the covenant agreement is kept and a list of curses if it is violated. There was a written agreement that listed the blessings of marriage and usually the curse was that the father kept the dowry money if the groom changed his mind! This written agreement was called a Ketubah. It frequently included financial protection for the wife should the husband die or divorce her. At this point the prospective groom poured a glass of wine and offered it to the prospective bride. If she drank it they were engaged to be married. If not, the deal was off.

4. Finally there is an oath or vow exchanged which publically ratifies the contract. The ratification of the contract was the wedding night. During the engagement period the groom and his father built a house for the new couple. Frequently it was just another room added onto the house. When the room was ready, word was sent to the bride's family. The bride gathered her bridesmaids, and they would wait for the groom to come. He could come at any moment. Typically there was a waiting period of a few days, but the bride did not know exactly when the groom would come for her. It was all very exciting. Usually he would come with a procession of groomsmen in the middle of the night with lamps and torches. Then he would take his bride and the wedding party would return to his house. There would be a big party and the relationship would be consummated. Their physical union was considered the ratification of the contract.

Our wedding customs today are considerably different, but it is interesting that the wedding ceremony still contains some of the key elements of these ancient contracts.

In the traditional service, I say these words to the couple: "having duly considered **the holy covenant** you are about to make, you now declare before this company your pledge of faith, each to the other." It is a covenant which is witnessed publically.

The vows state the stipulations: "I take you to be my husband/wife for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health." The length of the contract is stated: "till death do us part." Notice that it does not say "until I get tired of you or find someone I like better." The couple is united or glued together and death should be the only thing that tears that union apart.

A promise of blessing is given: "Be well assured that if these solemn vows are kept faithfully as God's Word demands, and if steadfastly you endeavor to the will of your Heavenly Father, God will bless you marriage, will grant you fulfillment in it, and will establish your home in peace." While the curses are not given explicitly, it is implied that if the couple

does not faithfully keep their vows, they will not experience fulfillment in their marriage or peace in their home. The marriage covenant is ratified today with the completion of the marriage certificate—a written agreement that these two persons have now become one.

The marriage covenant has always and still is a binding, public and legal commitment which says “I am committed to you no matter what; in sickness and in health. I will be faithful to you.”

Isn't it amazing that God chose the marriage covenant to describe our relationship with him? Christ is the bridegroom, and we are called the bride of Christ. He made a public, legal and binding contract with our ancestor Abraham. The stipulations of the contract were spelled out. God promised to give Abraham a son. He promised that his descendents would possess the Promised Land. He promised to make of him a great nation. In return, Abraham promised to serve only the Lord God. In a day when people worshipped many gods, this was a radical commitment.

Then the ratification occurred. God told Abraham to cut the animals in half. As I have mentioned the tradition was for both parties to stand in the middle of the carcasses and say, “If you violate our contract, this is what I'm going to do to you.” But God caused Abraham to fall into a deep sleep, and he did not stand among the carcasses. A smoking firepot appeared symbolizing the presence of God and passed between the pieces. Only God himself ratified the covenant. In effect, God was saying to Abraham, “I'm going to be faithful and keep my covenant to you no matter what. Even if you are unfaithful, I will be faithful. I will give this land to your descendents. If I don't keep this promise, you can do this to me.”

God fulfilled all of his promises to Abraham. He gave him a son called Isaac. His descendents occupied the Promised the Land and became a great nation. But Abraham's descendents, the people of God, did not remain faithful to the Lord God. They worshipped

other gods, the Baals and the Asherahs. They broke covenant with God. Yet God remained faithful. He kept his promises even when they did not.

The story of Israel's relationship to God is also our story. We too have been unfaithful to God. We have worshipped other gods: success, money, power, popularity. We have chosen to be our own god.

God has every right in this covenant to say to us: "Remember the carcasses? I am going to wipe the human race off the face of the earth because you did not keep the covenant."

But God did not ask Abraham or us to stand in the middle of the carcasses with him. He stood alone. What does that mean? It means that if we violated the covenant, God would pay the price for us. And that is exactly what he did in Jesus Christ. Jesus became a man and lived among us. And we took him and killed him on the cross. But really it should have been me on that cross, and it should have been you. We are the ones who were unfaithful. We are ones who did not keep the covenant. But God loved us so much, that he said: "you can do to me what I should do to you." He provided for our forgiveness so that our relationship with him, the broken covenant, could be restored. He is the groom and we are his bride. He has bought us with a price. Our dowry is pretty expensive. It cost him his life to purchase us as his bride.

He still promises to be faithful, even when we are not. He still reaches out to us and offers us forgiveness and a restored relationship. He has gone to prepare a place for us, a room for his bride—"in my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that where I am you may be also." That image is from a biblical wedding. Jesus is our groom who prepares a place in our Father's house

and then comes unexpectedly to take us to be with him. He has already paid the dowry and we are in the engagement period waiting for his return.

Marriage is based upon a covenant--a binding contract in which two persons become one. Marriage is a commitment to be faithful to each other no matter what. God is our groom who has promised to be faithful to us even when we are not faithful to him.

There may be someone here who needs to recommit to your marriage. You have been unfaithful by thought, word or deed or internet. You need to accept God's forgiveness and recommit to your marriage. There may be others here today who are being unfaithful to God. You have been your own god and served other gods. You need to accept God's forgiveness and recommit your life to him.

God is absolutely, totally, completely committed to you. How will you respond?