

GOD-DESIGNED MARRIAGE

Building Block #2 – The Covenant

So here's kind of a fun fact about why marriage in June became the most favorable month to get married. All roads lead to Rome, right? I watch a lot of biblical history and archaeology videos and was reminded of how some of our months are named after Roman gods. July, after Julius Caesar. August, after Caesar Augustus. March, after Mars, the god of war. Well June is named after Juno, the wife of Jupiter/Zeus. Jupiter is the Roman version of Greek Zeus. Rome basically adopted the Greek gods and gave them different names. Fun fact: Juno was seen as the goddess of marriage and children and because of that, June became the most favorable time to get married. Today, I think most people get married in June for the nice weather, But with that and pride month and Roe vs. Wade overturned, I thought we timed this study on marriage pretty good.

Anyway, so far in our God-Designed Marriage series, we have looked at how marriage is a great **foundation** for the family and the rest of society and why it's under attack. Then last week we placed our **1st building block** that we called **the Canvas** where we discussed how marriage paints a picture of the relational nature of God and His relationship between Christ and the Church. It's painting a gospel picture for the world! Last week, someone later told me how their marriage is no Mona Lisa! They've got some smudges and mistakes. I thought that's great because no marriage is perfect, and hey, how comforting to know people think Picasso was a great artist!

Today, we're going to lay **building block #2: The Covenant**. And before we begin, I just want to remind you that the reason in doing this study is not to call up some ghost from the past or cause shame or guilt. My desire is to prevent heartache or bring healing and direction to our relationships, which need constant maintenance. If you've experienced a broken marriage, please don't sense that you are irrevocably out of line with God's will for your life. There may be consequences for that, but He is a forgiver and restorer. He remembers we are dust (Ps. 103:14; 2 Sam. 12:13-14). I like what Gary Thomas said in his book *Sacred Marriage*, "*If you've... gone through a divorce, you serve no one – least of all God – by becoming fixated on something you can't now undo.*"ⁱⁱ Keep moving forward in God's grace.

Now, understanding the **covenantal nature of marriage** is critical to endurance. It is a rock that keeps you from being washed away when the storms hit. If we don't understand the covenant nature of it, we will inevitably redefine it as a contract or a conditional agreement or some other temporary relationship, much like a jewelry store in Hollywood did who had the sign in their front window "WE RENT WEDDING RINGS."ⁱⁱⁱ When we do marriage our way instead of God's way it's not until death do us part, but until debt, or disagreement, or disinterest, or drift, do us part. Instead of a covenant, it becomes a disposable contract – as it had in Jesus' day. And that's where we're going to start: **Matthew 19:1-12** with Jesus' instruction on marriage.

1 When Jesus had finished these words, He left Galilee and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan; 2 and large crowds followed Him, and He healed them there. 3 Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?” 4 And He answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no person is to separate.” 7 They said to Him, “Why, then, did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” 8 He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. 9 And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

10 The disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” 11 But He said to them, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept this, let him accept it.”

I. JESUS’ INSTRUCTION ON MARRIAGE. (Matt. 19:1-12)

The first thing Jesus does when questioned about marriage and divorce, is He reminds them of what we have learned already: that **marriage is God’s idea**. It is **designed by God** from the beginning in the book of Genesis. And where do you look for instructions for anything you own? The owner’s manual! The person who designed it understands how it operates. You can probably sense through their interaction here that God’s design is not popular though. These Pharisees are asking this question with the intention of discrediting Jesus in the eyes of the crowds following Him. Just like today, no matter how He answers, there will be those who disagree. But also, Jesus is in Perea, an area under the rule of Herod Antipas and Herodias, who beheaded John the baptizer for calling them out on their adulterous marriage. Knowing Jesus’ stance on marriage, they’re hoping He loses His head too. It’s an incredibly evil agenda they have against Jesus.

The Pharisees thought of divorce as something inconsequential and easy. During that time, there was a leading teacher in the Sanhedrin (a priestly council, kind of like the Supreme Court of the Israel at that time) named **Hillel** who taught you could divorce your wife for trivial reasons, including: burning dinner; having an unpleasant attitude; making a negative comment about her in-laws; or, if the man just found someone else he liked better.ⁱⁱⁱ Some covenant teaching, huh? Marriages wouldn’t last 2 weeks! When **Deuteronomy 24:1-4** said that a man could divorce his wife for if he found “*uncleanness*” or “*indecent*” in her, Hillel took a liberal definition of that to say it could refer to any trivial matter as mentioned above. But there was a more conservative school of interpretation taught by another leading rabbi named **Shammai** who taught that the term “*uncleanness*” referred to immorality like adultery. So Jesus clearly lines up more with Shammai’s more narrow view on this. The Pharisees, knowing this, are trying to make Jesus’ stringent teaching

on divorce unsavory to a culture where divorce was normalized and covenants were being undervalued. As always, and like Jesus, we have to care more about what God says than what men say on any given subject and do our best to line up our lives and teaching with His Word. And Jesus does that. He takes them back to Genesis, stating that marriage is designed to be **a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman.**

🔒 **Marriage is a lifetime commitment.**

I should say that even though it is lifelong, it is not eternal. It's until death. Jesus said in the resurrection we don't marry and aren't given in marriage but are like angels in the sense that we are single. The only marriage in heaven is the Church's marriage to Christ (Matt. 22:30). But in this life, a married couple becomes one flesh. They are to share their lives together. The 2 become 1 as **God, through a divine act, joins them together.** He consecrates it for life. Divorce was never part of the plan in the beginning.

That might surprise us, as it does His disciples. They said, *"If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry."* Jesus basically says, *"You're right. Not everyone can accept that."* And He goes on to talk about how just like we need God's grace to fulfill our marriage vows and stay pure, so the single person needs grace to live single for God and stay pure. He says there are **congenital** eunuchs who are born that way. There are **cultural** eunuchs like those in Jesus' day who guarded a king's harem were castrated so that they didn't cause problems. And there are **Christian** who by God's **gift of singleness**, live as "eunuchs" so that they can fully devote themselves to the work of God. Paul talks about this gift in **1 Corinthians 7:7** and how married or single, we have to rely on God's grace to stay pure and to war against the sin nature.

If you are debating whether to marry or not, you should be prayerfully studying these passages, and asking yourself questions like, *"Do I desire to serve God's kingdom without distraction? Can I be single without being bitter against God? Without being constantly overwhelmed by temptation?"* If not, you may not have the gift of singleness. Paul said it's better to marry than to burn with passion. Because of immoralities, each man should have his own wife and each wife her own husband (1 Cor. 7:2). Ask, *"Do I desire a lifelong partner? Do I desire to have a family? Am I willing to give up living for myself and live for my spouse until death do us part?"* You need to really pray about and consider the challenge that marriage is before you get married. This is a lifelong commitment until death do you part. Are you willing to accept that? Marriage is good but Paul said it is good not to marry too. Singleness has its advantages too.

The only reason why divorce was allowed, Jesus says, is because of sin. When the Pharisees asked, *"Why then did Moses **command** to give her a certificate of divorce..."* Jesus replied, *"Because of your **hardness of heart** Moses **permitted** you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it was not this way."* Notice **two very different words** there: **command** and **permit**. Jesus corrects them. Moses did not **command** divorce, but **permitted** it because of sin entering the picture and distorting God's design. He's saying because of sin, God made a narrow concession allowing for divorce in such a circumstance. The Pharisees widened the reason for divorce to just about anything and Jesus

is narrowing it back down. Divorce is never to be looked at as an easy “out” or first option. You never go into marriage thinking, “*Well, if it doesn’t work out we’ll just file for a divorce.*” That’s contract thinking, not covenant thinking. Divorce is the final option under permitted circumstances, and not a first option.^{iv} And just because there it is permitted, doesn’t always mean one should. My wife and I don’t even consider it an option. Our rule is:

Never use the “D” word. (1 Cor. 7:10; 39-40)

...and I don’t mean Dallas – as the country song goes. Divorce is a word that I don’t even like to use and painfully have to use today to discuss the biblical doctrine of divorce and marriage. The advice passed down to us was to not even consider the “D” word as part of your vocabulary in your marriage. It’s not an option. It’s not on the table because as soon as it comes up, it becomes a tool of manipulation and a constant threat to the security and freedom of the relationship.

The only *clear allowances* for divorce that I see in Scripture are due to **immorality** and **abandonment**. Jesus, in **verse 9**, it appears uses the word immorality in a general sense to refer to the various sinful, unfaithful, sexual immoralities like adultery. Paul also mentions abandonment of a believing spouse by an unbelieving spouse in **1 Corinthians 7:12-16**. If they insist on leaving, he says, no need to prolong it because you are called to peace and not bondage. People always say, “*Well, what about abuse?*” When it comes to abuse, I don’t like to presume upon the Word of God in hypothetical situations, but in my personal opinion I consider abuse to be a form of abandonment in just about every way. I don’t think God would have that spouse remain in that situation and they should seek immediate help. The only way that relationship should continue is through the genuine repentance of the abuser and careful, prayerful guidance from the Lord over an extended period of time. In *The Art of Marriage* study at our house there are couples who share their testimony of God helping them work through all these situations. For more on this subject, I’ve put a helpful sermon in the endnotes called *Marriage, Divorce, and Singleness*.^v

But please hear me when I say that even in some cases where there is something like adultery, we shouldn’t look at divorce as a first option. It’s an opportunity to first see God work to restore that marriage as the couple lives out the gospel picture of Christ and the Church. What Christ has shown us – mercy, grace, forgiveness, and love – we are called to extend to others. A marriage that goes through something that gives allowance for divorce, and yet does not do so, but works through it is one of the most powerful gospel pictures ever painted. Marriage will force you to grow in Christlikeness more than anything I know of in this world. When you get married and have children, you will face character issues in yourself you didn’t even know you had! That’s by design too. Marriage isn’t just to make us happy, but holy – more Christlike. And no matter what your exact position is on divorce, we all know how God feels about it. Turn back one book from Matthew to **Malachi 2:13-16**. I’m going to read from the NLT for clarity:

13 Here is another thing you do. You cover the Lord’s altar with tears, weeping and groaning because he pays no attention to your offerings and doesn’t accept them with pleasure. 14 You cry out, “Why doesn’t the Lord accept my worship?” I’ll tell you why! Because the Lord witnessed

*the vows you and your wife made when you were young. But you have been unfaithful to her, though she remained your faithful partner, the wife of your marriage vows [or, covenant - NIV]. 15 Didn't the Lord make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children [seed] from your union. So guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. 16 "For I hate divorce!" says the Lord, the God of Israel. "To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty, [NASB: to deal treacherously with her]" says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. "So **guard your heart**; do not be unfaithful to your wife."*

II. GOD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS DIVORCE: HATE. (Malachi 2:13-16)

A little context: Men in Israel, and especially leading priests who were to be a good example to others, were guilty of divorcing their Jewish wives and marrying pagan Gentiles (Neh. 13:23-29). They had set a poor example for the rest of the people and were being called to repent. God wasn't accepting their unrepentant worship (1 John 1:9). He also unmistakably gives **His opinion of divorce: He hates it**. God hates divorce. There is no such thing as a good divorce because they are a failure of God's purpose in marriage.^{vi} Marriage is designed to sanctify us and reflect His love and faithfulness, but divorce stops it cold.

He also hates it because of the effect it has on us and our families. He wants us to have an abundant life (John 10:10) but divorce upsets lives. God said seeking **godly seed**: the nation had many societal ills because of divorce affecting the children and pagan wives brought their false gods into the marriage. Divorce is never a private matter. It upsets relationships with children, family, friends, work, et cetera. To keep this from happening, God says we have to **guard our hearts**. Stay in the Word and stay close to God. Depend on His grace. We have to war against sin. We have to fight for our marriages. And we have to **remember our vows**. Remember our covenant:

Marriage is a covenant, not a contract. (Mal. 2:14; Prov. 2:17)

Chip Ingram writes, "*The typical marriage **contract**... says something like this: "I am absolutely committed to you, no matter what, until I am no longer fulfilled or the relationship just gets too hard for us to continue with. You meet my needs, and I'll meet yours. I will stay in love with you as long as you are responding in ways that make sense to me and make me feel loved. When you cease to fulfill me or meet the needs that I perceive you ought to, then I have the right to tell you we have apart, we are falling out of love, and I can't bear to think of being this unhappy the rest of my life." That's an agreement, but it's a very conditional one. It's something disposable.*"

On the contrary, a **covenant is a binding promise between two parties**. And no matter what kind of covenant it is in the Bible, it always has a **solemnity** to it – a sense that this is serious stuff and I better not make a vow hastily without really thinking about what I'm doing here. Solomon said in **Ecclesiastes 5:4-5**, "*He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. It is better not to make a vow that to make one and not fulfill it.*" Standing before God and public witnesses at a wedding is serious business to God. He is the Chief Witness on that day. It is a sacred moment. He is there. He is listening. And you recite your vows, God is the one joining a couple together.

Just to remind us of the solemnity of it: in the Bible, the nation of **Israel** has the Mosaic covenant with God where their blessing or cursing depends on whether or not they keep it. It's serious business for them and their livelihood. In **Genesis 15**, God makes a covenant with **Abraham**. As was typical back then in making a covenant, animals were slaughtered and split in two. Then the parties would walk through the split sacrifices, in essence saying, "*Thus be done to me if I break this covenant.*" The word "*covenant*" means "*to cut*" or "*to divide*". Normally both parties walked through the sacrifices but God put Abraham in a sleepy daze so that he wouldn't even try too. God alone took on the responsibility there to bind Himself to keep His promise by walking through the sacrifices alone. Whatever the type of covenant in the Bible, there is always a touch of solemn obligation – quite often sealed in blood.^{vii}

Every covenant has a sign or symbol to remind each party of the responsibility he or she brings to the covenant relationship. In the OT, it was circumcision. In the NT, it is baptism. As far as marriage is concerned, biblically you see nose rings and signet rings and various gifts exchanged like animals. Using **rings**, and especially on the left hand, fourth finger, does seem to be more of a cultural thing that developed and was fully adopted in the Roman era. Apparently in scientific study, dissecting cadavers, they thought they'd found an artery from that finger to the heart and that's why it became the finger of choice. Whatever their history, I like rings. They are symbolic of never-ending love and the diamonds remind us of Christ our Rock who holds it together. They are visible reminders to us and to all others that what we have promised, we will keep, and are worn as a constant reminder of our covenant commitment to each other. If you want the marriage to last, you need reminders of the covenant love.

Marriages operate on covenant, sacrificial love.

It's very helpful to think of different kinds of love: there is brotherly love, romantic love, and sacrificial love. Hollywood emphasized the warm and fuzzy romantic love, but sacrificial love is the kind needed most in marriage. Sacrificial love is what sticks with it and acts in good will on another's behalf despite our not feeling loved ourselves. This love has no strings attached (1 Cor. 13:1-8). It doesn't keep record of wrongs. It doesn't seek its own. It endures all things. It's **unconditional**. I heard my old pastor, Glenn Johnson, say in a wedding ceremony, "*The day you start making your spouse earn your love is the day you'll have problems.*" He also said that archaeologists make the best spouses because the older something is, the more interested in it they are! That's something you need to take home – the part about unconditional love. Marriages simply do not work when we place conditions on our love. Sometimes you will have to love your spouse whether they deserve it or not and whether you feel like it or not. So **you act not on your feelings, but on the covenant promise**. It's essentially a step of faith.

One person wrote, "*In a contract, two people make an agreement contingent on the performance of the other person, e.g., "I will pay you \$100 if you will fix my carburetor."* That's a contract. Both parties have a part to do. If you don't do your part, I won't do my part and the contract is broken. But a covenant is not like that. A covenant is a sacred promise. It does not rest on what

you do. It rests solely on my own faithfulness. A covenant means, “I will do this no matter what you do.” Josh McDowell talks about the **three kinds of love** too, saying, “There’s “I love you **if**,” “I love you **because**” and “I love you **in spite of**.” The first two are conditional—“I love you **if** you lose weight.” “I love you **because** you are so smart.” They are examples of **contract love**. The third one is an example of **covenant love**. “I love you **in spite of** your weaknesses. I love you **in spite of** your faults. I love you **in spite of [although]** you don’t always love me.” That’s the only kind of love that will last for a lifetime. Conditional love won’t make it because what if they don’t lose weight? What if one day he can’t think straight? What then? Will you love them even if they become debilitated in some handicap state and they can’t take care of themselves or be the marriage team you also pictured? Will you still love them then?”^{viii}

☪ **Covenant marriages offer security and fulfillment.**

Every marriage should foster the *eros* (Greek) romance love but romance is not a good basis for marriage. Only the sacrificial, Christlike, covenant *agape* (Greek) love is. No other love offers **freedom** and **security** from temporal conditions like beauty or happiness. Covenants also offers **fulfillment**. If marriage outside of God’s design is so fulfilling, why do people still marry in seeking fulfillment? Why does people lack fulfillment doing it their own way? In Swindoll’s book *Strike the Original Match*, he recounts the story of a man who divorced his wife and then went off into total unrestraint. He had a bachelor pad near the beach and lived it up with some new woman from day to day , but something was bothering him. He said to his friend, “*Why am I so depressed? Why do I feel a cold nothingness all the time? I know the guys here think it would be fantastic to have this kind of liberated freedom but honestly... I hate this life...*” After pausing for a few seconds, he said, “*You know what I'd really like? I'd like to go home tonight, smell dinner cooking, hug my wife hello, and spend the evening telling her and showing her how much I love her. I'd like to go to bed with her and not have to... prove my love for her, but just give her love, and go to sleep knowing she'd be there in the morning.*” Swindoll says, “*There it is, my friend. Straight scoop from an honest guy. Intimacy, fulfilling, enjoyable, meaningful intimacy must emerge from the God-ordained context of commitment and acceptance and marital harmony.*”^{ix}

My challenge to you this week comes from that Malachi passage to **remember your covenant** and to **reaffirm your vows to your spouse**. Let your spouse know you still stand by your word: “*to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to honor and to cherish, until death separates us.*” Since you’ve married, you’ve learned things about your spouse that you didn’t know before you were married – things you love and things that drive you crazy! Many of you have aged and changed – and your wedding pictures show it! It’s important they know you are still in it for the long haul. You will keep your promise.

ⁱ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 114

ⁱⁱ Charles Swindoll, *Strike the Original Match* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 18.

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Mark 9-16* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 54.

^{iv} Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: NT* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2007), 58.

^v For more on this subject see John MacArthur's sermon: *Marriage, Divorce, and Singleness*,
<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-359/marriage-divorce-and-singleness>

^{vi} Robert Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 459.

^{vii} Chip Ingram, *Marriage That Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 222.

^{viii} https://www.preceptaustin.org/the_covenant_of_marriage

^{ix} Swindoll, *Strike the Original Match* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 44.