Valuing Covenant

First in a new series for Feb. 2017, “Values that Build Loving Relationships.”

# Key idea: The concept of covenant is very important to lasting marriage relationships.

# Key Verses Matt. 19:4, 5

# Intro:

Those four words in the store window said far more than they intended. It was a jewelry store window in Hollywood, California. And the sign in the window read simply, “We rent wedding rings.” Now what in the world is that supposed to mean? Could the renting be for the purpose of ostentation, so a couple could appear on their wedding day to be possessing rings which in reality they could not afford? Or has marriage really devolved in the minds of some into an arrangement of convenience that is not expected to last long enough to risk investing in a permanent symbol of its existence? So one rents rings by the month or year instead of buying them.

Well, whatever the purpose of the sign in the window, as a pastor who has spoken with dozens of couples preparing for marriage, I can assure you that I have yet to find one couple that expected their union to be shorter than “till death do us part.” That’s good news because it reflects the Biblical principle of valuing covenant.

During this coming month, I hope to discuss together some key values that help us to build loving and lasting relationships. At the very basis of these values is the one that we talk about this morning, esteeming and affirming the marriage covenant itself.

# God values covenant

## God is a covenant maker

The fundamental reason for valuing the marriage covenant goes back to the character and actions of God. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob revealed himself to be a God who makes, keeps and values covenants.

What is a covenant?

“A covenant is a solemn agreement by both parties, usually sealed by a ritual and having an accompanying sign.” (Reflecting Christ-being p. 84)

The Old Testament describes three successive covenants between God and key righteous figures or groups; Noah, Abraham, and the children of Israel under the leadership of Moses.

“After the flood, God promised that there would never again be a universal flood. The covenant was sealed by a sacrifice and the sign of the rainbow was given. God also made a covenant with Abraham that had an accompanying sign. Perhaps the best example of a covenant is God’s agreement with the Israelites at Mount Sinai. Israel agreed to keep God’s laws, and God agreed to bless and protect them.” (Reflecting Christ-being p. 84)

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| **Table of Covenants** | | | | |
| **Covenant** | **Parties** | **Ceremony** | **Sign** | **Agreement** |
| Covenant with Noah Gen. 9:8-16 | God and Noah | At Noah’s sacrifice of worship | rainbow | God would never send a universal flood |
| Covenant with Abraham Gen. 15 17:1-14 | God and Abraham | Smoking pot with a torch passed between the halves of the sacrifice | circumcision | Abraham believed God about having a son  God promised to give his descendants the land of Canaan |
| Mosaic Covenant | God and the nation Israel | Events at Mt. Sinai | Sabbath | Israel would keep the Ten Commandments, God would bless and protect them as his covenant people. |
| Marriage Covenant | Husband and wife | The wedding | Sexual intercourse | To live together in faithfulness, to love, honor and cherish each other until death. |

## God is a covenant keeper

Not only is God a covenant maker, he is also a covenant keeper. He is completely faithful to the agreements that he has made. The Old Testament and indeed the coming of Jesus testify to the faithfulness of God to his promises to Abraham and to the nation Israel.

Moses summarized what Israel was learning about the character of God;

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. Deut. 7:9

In Malachi 2:14 in a passage where God is discussing with Israel their failure to keep covenant with him, the Bible author uses the same word for covenant in referring to marriage. The implication is that God considers marriage as a covenant too, a solemn agreement between two people, a continuing agreement, a permanent and lasting agreement. The marriage covenant is established in an initiating ritual, the wedding ceremony, and has an accompanying sign –“becoming one flesh” meaning sexual intimacy. And, as God is a faithful God, he expects faithfulness. God makes crystal clear to Israel through the prophet Malachi that he expects us to be faithful to our marriage covenants as he was and is faithful to his agreements with Noah, Abraham and the nation of Israel.

# Benefits of the marriage covenant

## Covenants are beneficial to both

Covenants are made because they have benefits to both parties. Sometimes in human agreements a treaty is found to be exploitive and not good for both parties. But remember, marriage is God’s invention, not a human one. He matched the first couple in the Garden of Eden. In the passage that we read, Jesus referred to the Creator’s original design.

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”   
 Matthew 19:4-6 NIV

God pronounced his creation in the garden as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). That included his invention of the marriage covenant.

## Benefits of marriage

Here are a few documented benefits of marriage

### Studies show marriage corresponds to lower death rates

A University of California study concluded “unmarried middle-aged men and women face twice the risk of dying within ten years.”

A UCLA analysis of 130 published studies concluded, “Virtually every study of mortality and marital status shows the unmarried of both sexes have higher death rates, whether by accident, disease, or self-inflicted wounds, and this is found in every country that maintains accurate health statistics” (Marriage . . . Only a piece of paper? - AFA Journal -June 96)

### Marriage makes for greater reported happiness

Regardless of culture or socio-economic factors, research consistently shows married people live markedly longer than the unmarried. The health benefit of marriage is strong enough, according to a 10-year British study, "to offset the risk of smoking for men and enough to offset approximately half the risk for women." Other studies show that married men and women are less likely to suffer from serious illnesses, and when they do, their recoveries are quicker and more successful. The Journal of the American Medical Association reported the health benefit of being married is equivalent to being in an age category 10 years younger.

Marriage not only gives you longer life, but a [happier](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/dating-your-spouse/6-ways-to-make-your-marriage-happy) life, too. Since 1936, studies have shown significantly higher levels of overall happiness and mental health for married people. A more recent study involving 17 diverse industrial nations found that married couples were 3.4 times more likely to report being generally happy and overall content in life, compared with cohabitating couples. By Glenn Stanton (http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/gods-design-for-marriage/hidden-benefits-of-marriage)

### Marriage is God’s vehicle for producing “godly offspring” (Malachi 2:15)

For many years I wondered about the logic of Malachi 2:15 when it mentions “godly offspring.” Why does God throw children into the discussion of marital faithfulness? But then as I was a pastor longer, I read about and observed how much more difficult it was for single parents and even remarried parents to raise their children in comparison to the two natural parents living and working together. When parents were divorced, it was so easy for the children to use the tensions and fears between separated parents against first one and then the other with the effect of spoiling discipline. Single parents find it hard to impose discipline as it would result in them losing out in the not-so-subtle competition for the child’s affections. I observed that going back and forth between homes interrupted children’s access to spiritual training greatly too. Then there is the matter of the marriage modeling. The children weren’t learning something from parental example that they could have been learning. Worse, no one would notice that loss for a generation, until the children themselves were trying to maintain a marriage covenant. Malachi was right; it was just so much simpler to achieve the outcome of godly offspring in an intact marriage. I’m not saying it is not possible outside the original marriage to raise children well. It is. And many people have successfully raised children alone or in remarriage families or foster families or other types of family situations. What I am saying is that it is easier and statistically more often successful to raise children in the original marriages. That is why God mentions “godly offspring” as one of his benefits for marriage.

### Marriage gives us an opportunity to work together as a team

One of the great principles of marriage is that God has so designed us that we tend to choose a mate that complements us and completes us. Emotionally and psychologically, our mate will tend to have strengths exactly where we are weak, if we are willing to see it and admit it. For example, my wife is the habitually punctual type by I’m the kind who runs behind. So she helps keep me on-time.

Harville Hendrix, author of the famous book, Getting the Love You Want, says that couples should actually choose to stay together in order to bring psychological healing to one another (pp. 75, 97). God has so arranged it that we tend to choose the spouse that completes us emotionally and psychologically. But getting to the point where we appreciate the complementary nature of God’s design is often rough. It involves overcoming our self-centeredness and arrogance enough to acknowledge the help that God has sent.

God desires that we are stronger together than separately. We can accomplish more together than separately too. The strength of a team is more than the sum of the individual strengths.

A marriage is to be the one place where each spouse’s weaknesses will be overlooked and protected. One of the goals of marriage is to make the weaknesses of any team member irrelevant. Because this is a partnership, what one person does not handle, the other often can handle well. What one partner does not understand, the other can step in and deal with. When marriage becomes an airing of weaknesses, mistakes, and problems, it drives a wedge between the couple and steals the wonder of unity and intimacy. P. 111, 112 Becoming a Godly Husband by Dr. Stieglitz.

### Poem: Marriage! By Ruth Harms Calkin

It’s rough. It’s tough. It’s work.

Anybody who says it isn’t

Has never been married.

Marriage has far bigger problems

Than toothpaste squeezed

From the middle of the tube.

Marriage means…

Grappling, aching, struggling.

It means putting up with personality weaknesses

Accepting criticism

And giving each other freedom to fail.

It means sharing deep feelings

About fear and rejection.

It means turning self-pity into laughter

And taking a walk to gain control.

Marriage means…

Gentleness and joy

Toughness and fortitude

Fairness and forgiveness

And a walloping amount of sacrifice.

Marriage means…

Learning to say nothing

When to keep talking

When to push a little

When to back off.

It means acknowledging

“I can’t to be God to you –

I need Him, too.”

Marriage means…

You are the other part of me

I am the other part of you.

We’ll work through

With never a thought of walking out.

Marriage means…

Two imperfect mates

Building permanently

Giving totally

In partnership with a perfect God.

Marriage, my love, means us!

# Intentional ways to value our marriage covenants

What are some practical ways that we value our marriage covenant? There are many ways that we could answer this question. I will pick just three quick ones.

## We value our covenant by showing loyalty

We value our covenant every time we value our spouse over the competition. The Bible warns us to “Guard your heart!” (Prov. 4:23). Consider these hypothetical incidents.

* A thirty-something man is walking through the mall with his wife. A couple college girls in revealing clothes walk by. The man’s head follows them all the way by. His stare is only broken when his wife tugs on his arm and then when he turns back around, he makes some smart remark about how sexy they were. How does his wife feel?
* A fifty year old husband and father of two is discovered by his wife to be a regular user of porn. How does that make her feel about their relationship?
* A married woman starts getting calls at home from a co-worker. She refuses them, tells her husband about his calls and asks her husband to answer the phone. How will the husband feel about the safety of the marriage?

Making these kinds of daily choices well is one way that we show loyalty to our spouse and demonstrate that we value our covenant of marriage. This is a sign as to whether or not we are actively guarding our heart.

## We value our covenant by showing unselfishness

The idea of covenant means that we look out for each other. This will also mean that we act unselfishly, caring for our spouse over our own self many times. Again I offer a couple examples to prod our thinking.

* Jasmine always insists on getting her own way in decisions that she and her husband Franklin are making. If she does not, she will sulk and refuse to cooperate with the family schedule until she does get her way. How does Franklin feel about the marriage covenant between them?
* Tom has been very sick for the last four months. His wife has done everything possible to care for him even though it has been very tiring and required that she temporarily stop going to her painting class. How does Tom feel about their marriage covenant?

Selfishness endangers the covenant. Unselfishness strengthens it.

## We value our covenant by taking time to strengthen it.

A third way that we can value our covenant is by taking time to work on it directly.

* Maybe we read a marriage enrichment book or attend a marriage enrichment weekend.
* Maybe we attend services in February for a Valentines sermon series.
* Maybe we take time out of our busy schedule to talk to each other about why we love each other and about how our marriage is going and how we can improve it.
* Maybe we go to counseling together when we need it
* Maybe we commit to a vacation time away together to have fun together and build friendship.
* Spending time in prayer together.

I’m sure you can think of your own ways but you get the idea. Doing things like this shows that we value our marriage, our covenant together. Our covenant is extremely valuable. Let’s act from day to day as if we understand that high value.

# Conclusion:

## Valuing Covenant on Communion Sunday

It is interesting to me that we are doing this message on Communion Sunday. This is the Sunday every month when we especially celebrate the New Covenant between God and humanity that Jesus has brought about by his sacrifice of himself. We are gathered this morning to value and honor and remember this covenant that God has made with us and to learn more about how to live into that covenant. We know that it is not always easy to be a Christ-follower. But we are determined to do so. And we are here to receive of his body and blood, figuratively speaking, in order to receive literally of his strength to live as a Christian, as a participant in that New Covenant.

For those who are married, staying married is not always easy either. Most married couples can vouch for that. But we are here this morning as a part of our Christian commitment to ask God for strength to live into our marriage covenants as well. We have vowed them before God. We believe them to be creations of God. And we ask God now as a part of our devotion before God today to help us fulfill them in faithfulness.