

## **Marriage, Covenant or Contract**

Grace Church, 10-10-10

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### **Introduction:**

Perhaps you have heard the name Mark Sanford. He is the infamous governor of South Carolina that has violated his wedding covenant. His wife Jenny Sanford recently wrote a book by the title Staying True, which is an account of her life. She stayed true to herself, her marriage, her family and her ideals. He did not. I would like to read a couple of lines from an editorial about her book, listen to what she has to say.

(Read excerpts from the article by Naomi Schaefer Riley)

It is becoming easier in the United States to walk away from a marriage than from a contract to buy a new car. Some have called marriage the "least binding of all contracts."

God never intended for marriage to be a convenience based contract that we could easily get out of but a character-based covenant that we would be committed to for life.

The perspectives we have on what to expect from our marriages are not always biblical. Hollywood and the media would have us believe that marriage should be an expanded honeymoon, a perpetual Caribbean cruise, romantic evenings, and shopping trips to Victoria Secrets.

I know you've heard me share about couples or individuals who have sat in my office and described how they were unhappy in their marriage and they were confident God wanted them to be happy, consequently they were going to divorce and move on with their lives.

Your spouse is not responsible for your happiness. You are! Divorcing your spouse and finding someone else isn't the answer and it certainly isn't God's answer. The problem here is that these individuals view marriage as a contract to be broken, not a covenant to be kept. I would ask you this morning what about you? Is your marriage a contract or a covenant?

If we depend on Hollywood and other various media to present to us what marriage is all about, then we really get a skewed picture.

Marriage relationships are presented in a wide variety of ways, from the fighting on Jerry Springer to the sob stories, though very tragic, on Oprah.

We must be very careful about how much we take from pop psychologists that have quick answers and quick fixes to the challenges that every marriage faces.

What are we to expect from marriages, which do not have any understanding or at least not a clear understanding of what God's perspective on marriage is.

The title of our worship in the Word is "Marriage: Contract or Covenant"

Marriage is not a license, is not a casual agreement, is not to be viewed as the purchase of a home i.e. beginner homes to find out what type of home we would like to have and then we graduate to what it is that we really want.

#### **PTR**

Marriage is a covenant between God and a man and a woman.

This means that marriage is not always a walk in the park on a sunny afternoon. Though it can be that and there are periods of sunny skies and cool breezes. Marriage at times is rainy days, blustery winters and **storms that brew out of the heat of topical discussion.**

So what I would like to achieve this morning is for us to take a look at what the Word of God has to say about marriage. I realize this morning that I am speaking to people who are having various experiences in their marriages. I realize that I'm speaking to people who have been married, divorced and remarried. I think most of you know that divorce is not what God has intended. As a matter of fact, we are to do everything possible to see that it does not happen.

I may address divorce and remarriage in this process of focusing on the family over the next 3 to 4 weeks. Just let me say at the moment, if you're not divorced, don't and if you are, play the ball where it lies.

It seems to me that one of the things which plays into the divorce rate is the pre-wedding picture of marriage by those who enter into it. What I mean is; what is the view that is held by two people getting married? Do they have a picture of reality or is it one that is dictated by media? If the picture is discolored then when reality in the marriage does not add up to what is perceived to be correct then divorce seems to be the thing that will bring back happiness.

So what I would like to do this morning is for us to take a close look at the foundational meaning of wedding vows.

**Every bride and groom, past, present and future needs to know:**

1. The difference between legal marriage and the biblical marriage.
2. The differences between marriage based on contract and one based on covenant.

**America is a contract-oriented society:**

We like contracts because they have loopholes and bailout options. It is fine to live by a contract, but (PTR) we must love by a covenant.

Modern approach to marriage is to focus on personal rights and needs: "I deserve to be happy." "I'm entitled to have my needs met." "If this relationship ceases to give me what I want, if it gets tough or real boring, I can walk away." After all, marriage is a contract and contracts are made to be broken.

**Society views marriage as:**

1. A social contract based on self gratification.
2. A commitment based on convenience.
3. A terminal contract.

I promise to love, honor, and quit whenever I want to.

What I would like for us to achieve this morning is an understanding of the foundation, the basis, the origin of this relationship between a man and a woman that we call marriage. We

will do that in a few moments by taking a look at Genesis 2:18-24. This is the biblical account of the first marriage ever performed. It lays the foundation for us to understand that marriage is not a contract, it is not an agreement, it is a covenant. I will describe for you, define for you the meaning of covenant and how it differs from contract. I hope that we will leave this time together with a clear understanding of the permanence of the covenant of marriage.

As I said last Sunday, I understand that I am speaking to people who have already been involved in marriages that have broken the covenant. I understand that. I hope and it's very likely it is true that you understand it is not God's design. You must now play the ball where it lies. You cannot unscramble eggs. However, at the same time I want to exhort each of us that there are consequences to covenant marriage breaking.

And it's not as simple and easy as saying well God will forgive. We should all stand up and shout hallelujah, praise be to God, because he indeed is a forgiving God. At the same time he is a righteous God, a God who understands that the handiwork of his creative processes, we the people, are never more happier and never more holier then when we are living in accord with the design of the creator.

A friend of mine several years ago was very frustrated at the company from which he had bought a four wheeler. It was one of those heavy-duty recreational vehicles. The transmission went out on this vehicle very early in the process. When he contacted the manufacturer of this piece of equipment, which was called a mule, he was told that the mule was not designed to do the work he was doing with it and therefore the company would not stand behind the warranty. The same thing is true with the marriage covenant. When we break the marriage covenant, which it was not designed to be broken, the creator of the covenant does not stand behind it.

I will come back to the idea of covenant and contrast it with contract in just a little bit. But first I wanted to take a look at what Jesus has to say about marriage. I direct your attention to Matthew 19:11-12 and then we will go to the account in Genesis chapter 2.

11 But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been

made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it." (Mt 19:11-12 ESV)

Jesus is responding here to a question from the Pharisees about divorce. I want us to feel this morning the passion that Christ has for God's design and purpose for those who have entered into the covenant of marriage. The question was "is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" Jesus answered them by saying "have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female and said "therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let no man separate.

The Pharisees go on to question him about his statement by asking why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce and send her away? To which Jesus replied because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you divorce your wives but from the beginning it was not so. And then he gives the statement which has caused many a theological discussion and angst in the hearts of believers.

"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

The response of the disciples and hearing the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees is "if such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

They just didn't get it. They did not understand the magnificence of the marriage covenant which God had instituted. They were failing to understand that marriage is the display of who God is.

If that was the reaction of people in a very conservative Jewish culture, then how much more is it controversial in today's let it all hang out modus operandi society that we live in. It is a society in which self gratification is the ultimate goal of life. It is a society in which television and movies flaunt the act of sexual intercourse as if it were just enjoying another Snickers bar. We should not be amazed that such a society is not easily accepting of the glory of marriage which Jesus is

referring to here in this passage. We need to hear the rest of the story here. Jesus said to them in response to their exclamation "It would be better not to marry." "Not everyone can receive this saying," but only those to whom it is given... Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (Matthew 19:11-12).

It seems to me that our response to this interaction between Jesus and the disciples would be one that would compel us into action.

**PTR:**

**Our relationship as husband and wife is a display of God's character; his love, his mercy and grace, his understanding of human nature.**

In a society where it is easier to get a divorce than it is to get out of a subprime housing loan, we must understand that we as followers of Christ are a picture to those outside of the faith of what marriage is all about.

Now let's go to Genesis chapter 2 and observe the making of this covenant of marriage. So would you take your Bibles please and turned to **Genesis chapter 2:18-24 and stand with me as I read it.** Thank you.

There are four observations that I want to bring to your attention this morning, which I hope and pray, would bring a determination into our hearts and minds of what it means to be involved in a **covenant marriage.**

**Marriage was designed by God**

18 Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." (Ge 2:18 ESV)

It is important for us to understand that it was not Adam who stood looking around the garden at all the various animals and having an "aha moment" in which he exclaims "I'm all alone there was no one like me". No, rather it was God who said it is not good that man should be alone. And with that statement having been made he set about to make what Scripture says is "a helper fit for him". Then God causes a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and while he slept he took one of his ribs and closed up the place

with flesh. God then took the rib from the man and made it into a woman.

In chapter 1 of Genesis we are told God created man in his own image, he made them male and female. And God blessed them and he said to them be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion. Already we see the design of marriage and the command of being fruitful and multiplying.

Here's the second observation we should make from this passage.

### **God gave away the first bride**

At the very first wedding it is God who is giving the first bride to the first husband. Look with me in verse 22. "And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man". Adam was not seeking a wife, it was God who saw that it would be good for them to be together and he brings Eve to Adam and gives her to him as his wife. Each belong to God, she was his creation not Adams. God gives her to Adam in this new kind of relationship called marriage, unlike any other relationship in the world.

### **God spoke the design of marriage into existence**

Not only did God create woman and bring her to the man in the making of the first marriage covenant he also speaks, and in speaking gives to us the design of the marriage covenant and one of the results of entering into that covenant. Look in verse 24 with me "therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and they shall become one flesh."

### **God performs the one-flesh union**

..and they shall become one flesh."

While there are several ramifications of the becoming "one-flesh", one of the first things we ought to think about is that one-flesh has written all over it permanency of relationship, a relationship that should not be broken. It's like putting two eggs in a frying pan and scrambling them, you can't unscramble them.

Jesus speaks to this permanency of marriage in Mark chapter 10:8-9.

8 and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. 9 What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (Mk 10:8-9 ESV)

When a man and woman stand together before the pastor and recite their wedding vows together, they and the pastor are not the main actors. God reserves the right to be. It is God who does the joining of one flesh together. Perhaps this is the first time you've heard this, that it is God who is performing this marriage and the wedding vows that are repeated are vows of a covenant between God and a man and a woman. It seems to me that far too many Christians have not yet grasped the reality that this bond they have through their wedding vows, which results in a covenant between them and God, is a very serious commitment. Perhaps the lack of understanding of this is one of the reasons that the divorce rate amongst evangelical Christians is not too much different from the rest of the world.

(Information about the divorce rate in the Christian community)

The Barna Group found in its latest study (January 2008) that born again Christians who are not evangelical were indistinguishable from the national average on the matter of divorce with 33 percent having married and divorced at least once. Among all born again Christians, which includes [evangelicals](#), the divorce figure is 32 percent, which is statistically identical to the 33 percent figure among non-born again adults, the research group noted.

Which I say to you this morning, is an absolute tragedy. Marriage is a display of who God is. Marriage is built on that covenant making relationship that Jesus Christ achieved on the cross between himself and the church. That's what Paul said in Ephesians chapter 5. That being the truth of the husband-wife relationship means that this has direct impact on your oikos.

Let me stop and take a moment and **refresh our minds about oikos**. Perhaps you're hearing it for the first time this morning.

The concept of the two shall become one flesh could be a whole worship in the word time together but, let me just briefly comment about what it means to become one flesh. It is just not the consummation of the marriage by the physical act of sex. One flesh is much more than that. And for those of us who are

married we know that, we have experienced it. It is becoming one mentally, one emotionally, one in our desires and dreams. It is understanding that together and dreams are brighter and in our tragedies we are stronger because we complete one another.

Let me ask a question. Why do you think God instituted the covenant of marriage and not the contract of marriage? Let me give you a few reasons that Fred Lowry, pastor at First Baptist in Bossier City Louisiana, writes in his book Covenant Marriage.

**Reasons for a covenant** marriage:

God knew we couldn't build marriage on:

1. **Lust**. *Marriage isn't a cure for lust; self-control is.*
2. **Physical attraction**. Beauty fades and gravity takes its toll.
3. **Feelings**. Fickle, up and down like a fast yo-yo.
4. **Private contract**. Easily canceled and cast aside on personal whims and weaknesses.

Long-term marriage demands more than a piece of paper. It calls for the merging of lives and the bonding of hearts.

- **Contact is about legalism and leverage - - - covenant is about love and loyalty.**
- **Contract is for "as long as we both shall love" - - - covenant is for "as long as we both shall live"**
- **Contract calls for the signing of names - - - a covenant calls for the binding of hearts.**
- **Contract is writing your name in ink across a piece of paper - - - a covenant is writing the name of your mate across your heart in blood.**

**PTR:**

To marry in covenant is to **form a bond strong enough** that a mate's heart can rely on it and a child's heart can count it!

- Covenant is the merging of hearts-two beating as one!
- Covenant is the blending of lives-two becoming one!

When it comes to marriage, the world has it all wrong. Covenant is the only adequate foundation on which to build a lasting

marriage. We must recover and reaffirm the biblical view of marriage as a sacred and permanent covenant. When you enter a covenant marriage you are saying, "I am yours by covenant and you are mine by covenant and neither one of us is going anywhere."

Let's take a few minutes and **contrast the difference** between a contract and a covenant.

<b>Contract</b>	<b>Covenant</b>
You had <b>better do it!</b>	How may I serve you?
What <b>do I get?</b>	What can I give?
What will <b>it take?</b>	Whatever it takes!
It's <b>not my</b> responsibility.	I'm happy to do it!
It's <b>not my</b> fault.	I accept responsibility.
I'll meet you <b>halfway.</b>	I'll give 100%.
I'll be <b>faithful for now.</b>	I'll be faithful forever.
I am <b>suspicious.</b>	I am trusting.
I <b>have to.</b>	I want to.
It's <b>a deal.</b>	It's a relationship

How you answer determines:

1. How you approach your marriage
2. how hard you work on your marriage
3. how you see your spouse

If your marriage is a contract, you see your spouse as he or she is - faults, flaws and foibles. Every irritation can become huge. Assume the worst.

If your marriage is a covenant, you see your spouse not as he or she is, but what he or she can become. Assume the best. Overlook the imperfections.

The contract magnifies faults. A covenant covers faults with love.

Even those marriages that have began as a covenant can become a contract over time. If you relate to some of the following statements it may be that your marriage covenant has morphed into a contract.

- I'll do my part, if you do yours.
- I'll meet you in the middle.
- If you'll do this, I'll do that.
- Marriage is a 50/50 proposition.
- That's not my role.

These phrases relate to terms and conditions and are contractual in nature. A true covenant marriage is always a threesome; God husband and wife.

### So What?

Viewing your marriage for what it is, a covenant between you and your spouse and God, will absolutely revolutionize your relationship. You may sit here this morning thinking it's only a matter of time and I'm out of here. Studies have proven that for couples who are in this position and choose to hang in there and commit to working at it and working through it, in five years or less they have one of the most energized marriages possible. They are absolutely amazed at what has taken place.

Not only is the marriage covenant God's doing but the marriage itself is the display of God. That is, it is for God's glory. I so long for us as singles - married couples to understand that our lives as Christians is for the praises of God's glory. This is not because God is in need of our boasting and preaching about him but rather **when his glory is displayed we are never dismayed.**

Again I remind you that your marriage relationship has more to do with the display of God's glory to your oikos than you and I tend to understand and grasp.

Covenant marriage, as divinely planned, is a binding together of three persons: a man, a woman, and Almighty God. As long as the couple stays in close contact with each other and God, they have an unbreakable bond. Staying married, therefore, is not about staying in love. It is about keeping covenant "till death do us part" or "as long as we both shall live" is a sacred covenant promise. It is the same kind of promise Jesus made to his bride, the church, when he died for her. Therefore what makes divorce and remarriage so horrific in God's eyes is not merely that it involves covenant breaking to the spouse, but it involves

misrepresenting Christ and his covenant. Christ will never leave his wife. Not ever. There may be times of painful distance and tragic backsliding on our part. But Christ keeps his covenant forever. Marriage is a display of that! That is the most ultimate thing we can say about it.

**By God's design, life's two most intimate and sacred relationships are covenant relationships. They are:**

1. Salvation
2. Marriage

For those of us who have placed saving faith in Jesus Christ, we have entered into a blood bought covenant purchased by Jesus Christ at Calvary. You are offered forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ as a free gift. It cannot be earned. It cannot be unearned.

If God operated on the basis of contract we would all be doomed. I certainly would. I've broken many promises. I defaulted. How about you? God has given us unconditional Grace, unconditional love and unending forgiveness. This unconditional love is what nailed to the cross our certificate of debt. We saw this last week in Colossians 2:14.

**Three things your mate needs** that you can't give apart from the power and grace of God:

1. A love that is unconditional
2. a forgiveness that is unending
3. an attitude that is unselfish

Covenant love is a tenacious love that never lets go. Never gives up. Never quits-but holds on with a bulldog tenacity regardless of what the other partner does or fails to do. Unconditional covenant love overrides feelings, fickleness and even failures.

What happens in a marriage when your worst nightmare occurs? You need to know in advance that it is possible to get through such a worst-case scenario. You don't have to crash and burn. It is not the end of the world. In fact, it is best to survive and soar again-you just need to know how to pull out of the spiral and set things back on course.

Below is a note from Dr Jim Cox to a friend who had asked for advice as he was approaching his wedding day.

The most important thing for a happy marriage is for each spouse to develop an intimate, growing relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of the love you have for Him, you will be able to treat your spouse with sacrificial, unconditional love. Because God loved us, when we didn't deserve it, we can love our spouse in the same way. We can forgive because He has forgiven us. We can give grace and mercy to our spouse as God has given grace and mercy to us. When the Holy Spirit controls us, He gives us the power to overcome our selfishness and self centeredness. He gives us the ability to look to the interests of others (more specifically; your spouse's interests).