**WEDDING SERMON**

**THE MARRIAGE COVENANT**

**Malachi 2:13-16**

**INTRODUCTION**

Last Sunday, one of the families in our church hosted a special get-together for Jireh and Dorcas and some of their friends from our church. My wife Nina was able to go, and when she got home a little later that evening she told me all about it.

One of the things they did was they asked Jireh and Dorcas to think about one word that they would use to describe the other. Dorcas didn’t take long to answer. “Food!” Jireh decided to show his sensitive side and said, “Perfect Octave”. What’s a perfect octave? Wikipedia says the following:

A musical interval of the Western twelve-semitone system consisting of twelve semitones and spanning eight degrees of the diatonic scale. It is enharmonically equivalent to an augmented seventh and is commonly referred to as an octave.

Needless to say, Jireh’s answer required some explanation. He said something to the effect of, “I used to think we were the same person, like we were the same note on a scale. But now I realize that we’re the same but different, like an octave, but together we can make beautiful music.”

I’ve spent a lot of time preparing Jireh and Dorcas for marriage, and if you would ask me to use one word to describe this couple, it would be this: *radical*. They’re not afraid to think outside the box, not because they want to show off or impress other people, but because they want to live in a way that’s consistent with their convictions. The fact that we’re here celebrating their wedding during our Sunday service is a testament this. I’ve never met anyone who wanted to do it this way, but when Jireh and Dorcas told me that they wanted get married during our Sunday service so that their whole church family could celebrate with them, it wasn’t hard for the leadership team of our church to say “yes”.

This is a radical couple that isn’t afraid to do radical things. These days, you can say that marriage itself is a radical idea. I’m not just talking about people getting married. That’s not radical. People are still getting married all the time. But there’s a big difference between getting married and actually living the way marriage is meant to be.

The Bible talks about marriage as a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. Lifelong. In an age when divorce rates are higher than ever, that’s rare. And yet, that’s what marriage is meant to be. That’s why marriage is radical.

Why is staying married for life so hard? Why is it becoming increasingly rare? I think there are a number of possible answers to this vexing question, but today I’m just going to explore one of them, and it’s this: understanding a marriage as a contract rather than as a covenant.

The concept of a “Covenant” is an extremely important one in the Bible. In order to understand marriage, we need to understand covenants, but the reality is that most of us don’t.

A contract, on the other hand, is something we’re familiar with. My contracts professor defined contracts simply as the enforcement of promises. We make promises all the time. If we break a promise, no one’s going to force us to do anything. We may suffer a strained relationship or a bad reputation, but that’s about it. A contract changes that. A contract says that, if you break your promise, it will trigger certain enforceable consequences against you.

Take a contract with your employer. If your boss fires you, the contract says that he promises to give you fair notice, and that he’ll pay you severance, etc. If he fails to do anything that he promised to do in the contract, you can take your case to the courts, and a judge will help you enforce the terms of the promise. That’s why contracts are called “enforceable promises”. They’re promises that can be enforced by the civil authorities.

The thing about contracts is that they’re quite easily broken. Breaking contracts is merely seen as the cost of doing business. A company can’t afford to keep you on any more, so they fire you even though they have to keep their promises to you, like pay you severance. That’s a price they’re willing to pay, because they’ve decided that the costs of keeping you outweigh the benefits.

That’s how marriage is understood today. Marriage is seen as a sort of contract that can be broken when the costs of the marriage outweigh the benefits. And then what happens? A series of enforceable promises are triggered: promises of spousal and child support, the division of property, and child custody arrangements, all enforced by the courts.

That’s not a very romantic vision of marriage, is it? And yet that’s the reality of our culture’s understanding of marriage today. Marriage is a contract. Couples may pledge undying love to one another on their wedding day, but a few years down the road, or perhaps just a few months down the road, it’s all over as soon as one the costs seem to outweigh the benefits.

That’s not what the Bible teaches about marriage. It doesn’t teach that marriage is a contract. It teaches that marriage is a *covenant*. They’re not the same. They’re similar in that both impose benefits and responsibilities on the parties entering into it, but they’re also profoundly different. It’s these profound differences that will sustain a marriage even when the costs seem to outweigh the benefits.

To understand what it means for a marriage to be a covenant, we’re going to look at a little passage in the book of Malachi. In this passage, God is rebuking Israel for failing to honour the covenant of marriage. Men were being unfaithful to their wives, and as a consequence, God tells them that he will no longer listen to their prayers or accept their offerings. But as those who have read the Bible know, God doesn’t just punish his people and abandon them. He calls them to change, and he promises to help them change. That’s what God does in the book of Malachi. And as he does this, he gives us some of the richest teaching on the nature of marriage that is found in the Bible.

The title of this message is **The Marriage Covenant**. As we look at our text, I’m going to show you five things about the marriage covenant that distinguish it from a contract. My ultimate aim is to show you that **The Marriage Covenant is the Key to Marriage Faithfulness.**

(1) **THE MARRIAGE COVENANT IS SACRED**

The first thing our text teaches us about the marriage covenant is that it is *sacred*. We see that first in verse 14. Verse 14 says that “the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth.” When a man and a woman get married, *God* is there. Yes, we know that God is omnipresent. He is everywhere all the time, and yet, the Bible also teaches that God can uniquely manifest his presence at certain times and places. That was the case with the Temple in Jerusalem, where God dwelled in the Holy of Holies. That is the case in the church, for Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt. 18:20). And that is the case in marriage.

God is here to witness this wedding ceremony. God was watching when Dorcas walked down the aisle. God is here now as his Word is taught and proclaimed. God will be here later listening to the vows that will be exchanged. God is here witnessing this ceremony along with all of you, and wherever God chooses to uniquely manifest his presence, that place is *sacred*.

These days, the category of things being “sacred” isn’t something that we’re very familiar with. We don’t really know what it means for something to be sacred. We don’t know how the “sacredness”, or the *sanctity* of something, changes how we interact with it. The only exception I could think of was this: the sanctity of human life. Religious and non-religious people both speak about the sanctity, or the “sacredness” of life. People of different backgrounds and beliefs accept that you can’t put a price tag on life, because its value transcends our world. Life is sacred.

Think of what we’re willing to do as a society for the sick. When someone gets cancer, we don’t just let them die. We do whatever we can to preserve and extend their lives. It doesn’t matter if it’s a rich business person or a newborn baby. We protect life because we value life, even when it doesn’t make sense to do so on a cost-benefit analysis. We understand life to be sacred, and as something that is sacred, it should always be treasured, honoured, and respected.

The same is true of marriage. Marriage is a *sacred* institution that should always be treasured, honoured, and respected even when it doesn’t make sense to do so on a cost-benefit analysis, because it doesn’t just belong to the couple. It belongs to God. Some might say that when married couple that has no children mutually agrees to get divorced, there’s nothing wrong with that, because no one’s suffering any harm, but that loses sight of the sanctity of marriage. Even when *people* don’t seem to suffer, *marriage itself* suffers, because it’s not being treated with the respect that it deserves.

Jireh and Dorcas, remember that your marriage doesn’t ultimately belong to you. It belongs to *God*. It isn’t just a worldly institution governed by contract. It’s a *sacred* institution governed by covenant. God is here as your witness. He is with you now as your marriage begins, and he will continue to be with you as your marriage matures. Honour him by honouring your marriage.

(2) **THE MARRIAGE COVENANT IS UNIFYING**

The second thing our text teaches us about the marriage covenant is that it is unifying. It brings two people together and makes them *one*. Verse 15: “Did he not make them *one*”.

This has been the Biblical teaching on marriage since the beginning of time. Shortly after God made the first man and woman in Genesis 2, it says, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become *one flesh*.” This word “flesh” here doesn’t just mean the body. It means the whole person. Later in Genesis 6 in the times of Noah it says, “God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all *flesh* had corrupted their way on the earth”. That’s not just talking about physical bodies. It’s talking about people.

So when the Bible says that marriage joins two people and makes them *one flesh*, it’s not just talking about physical intimacy. Physical intimacy is just the physical expression of the deeper and more mysterious reality of two people becoming one. That’s why the Apostle Paul can say in Ephesians 5:28:

“…husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”

Contracts don’t do that. They might bring people together to achieve a common enterprise, but they don’t bring people together and make them *one*. The parties to a contract remain separate and distinct. They’re independent entities that retain their independent identities. That’s one of the reasons why contracts can be broken so easily. Your boss can fire you, or you can quit your job, and yet the company will remain the company, and you will remain you.

That’s not the case with the marriage covenant. Marriage unites two people in such a way that the life of one fuses with the life of another. So when a marriage union dies, part of each member of that union dies as well. They’re no longer the same people that they were in marriage. Marriages unifies a man and a woman in such a profound, mysterious way that it completely changes their lives. Two lives lived separately become one life lived together. That’s the beautiful thing about marriage.

But notice something else about verse 15. It doesn’t just say that God made them one. It also says that he gave them “a portion of the Spirit in their union”. Marriage unites a man and a woman, and unites them both to God. God is just as much a part of the marriage as the husband and the wife are.

When I was getting married, my pastor said that marriage is like a triangle, with God at one point, the husband at another, and the wife at the other. He said that the best way for the husband and wife to grow closer to each other is for each of them to grow closer to God.

Jireh and Dorcas, remember that God has made you *one*. You are to care for each other as you would want to be cared for. You are to understand one another as you understand yourself. And you are to seek the Lord and grow in him, individually, and together, because that’s the only way you’ll grow closer to one another.

(3) **THE MARRIAGE COVENANT IS RELATIONAL**

Third, the marriage covenant is relational. Contracts govern services. “I’ll cut your grass for $20”. Or “I’ll work 40 hours/week for $12/hour.” Covenants govern relationships. When God entered into a covenant with Israel, he didn’t just say, “You do this for me, and I’ll do this for you.” He said, “You will be my people, and I will be your God.” Covenants are relational.

The same is true of marriage. Verse 14 reminds men that their wives are their “companions”. “Companion” is a great word, but it’s sadly underused. We know a lot about “travel companions” (those we journey with around the world) but we don’t know much about “life companions” (those we journey with through life itself). Marriage is meant to make two people “life companions”. I love how the 1559 Anglican Book of Common Prayer puts it:

“[Marriage] was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.”

Marriage is about two people helping each other through the struggles of life. It’s about two people comforting each other through its pains. It’s about two companions journeying together through the prosperities and adversities of life, picking one another up, making each other laugh, and loving one another no matter how hard life may become.

Jireh and Dorcas, never forget this. Marriage isn’t just about delegating responsibilities. “You work, and I’ll stay home with the kids” or “You cook, and I cut the grass.” That’s just fluff. The substance of marriage is your relationship with one another. It’s caring for one another.

Believe me when I say you’ll be tempted to forget this one day, especially when you have kids. When you have kids, you’ll have no trouble thinking about your spouse as your partner, but you’ll start losing sight of your spouse as your *friend*. Don’t stop working on your friendship. Don’t stop living as one another’s companion, because that’s what the marriage covenant is about.

(4) **THE MARRIAGE COVENANT IS PROCREATIVE**

Speaking of kids, the fourth characteristic of the marriage covenant is that it’s procreative. Verse 15 tells us that God is the one who brings people together. God is the one who makes them one and gives them a portion of the Spirit in their union. But why? Verse 16: “And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring.”

God wants couples to have children. He always has. In fact, Genesis tells us that God only issued two commands to Adam and Eve before sin entered the world: don’t eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; and be fruitful and multiply. God has filled the earth with life, and now he wants those made in his image to fill the earth with life as well.

I think a lot of people still see the connection between marriage and having children. You meet a lot of people these days who date for the longest time and are content with that arrangement until the day they start talking about kids. As soon as they start talking about kids, that’s when they start talking about marriage, because they still realize that the best context to raise children in is the context of marriage.

That’s not a coincidence. God created marriage *so that* people would have kids. Or to be more specific, God created marriage so that people would have *godly* kids, little people who are slowly but surely being raised to become like *God*. People who are righteous. Just. Merciful. Humble. Loving. God wants to fill the earth with people like that, so that he might be glorified through them.

This is an important reminder for us today. We live in a time when marriage is becoming increasingly inward-focused. People get married to fulfill each other. People get married to satisfy each other. And if children could potentially threaten that satisfaction, they want nothing to do with them. But that’s not what marriage is about. Marriage isn’t meant to be inward-focused. It’s meant to be outward-focused. A husband and wife aren’t just meant to live face-to-face in satisfying one another. They’re meant to live side-by-side in being a blessing to others, and there’s no better way to do that than to have and raise children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Jireh and Dorcas, I know this is your desire, and I commend you for it. In a way, it’s not surprising, because you’re already living side-by-side in being a blessing to others. You are a radical couple, and you show that in the way you reach out to others, how you invite them into your lives, and how you seek to be a blessing to those around you. Lord willing, may you be a blessing to the children that God blesses you with one day.

(5) **THE MARRIAGE COVENANT IS LIFELONG**

The last thing our text reveals is that the marriage covenant is lifelong. We see that in verse 15, where the Lord says, “So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.”

As long as you have breath in your lungs, this covenant isn’t meant to end. You are to be faithful to one another to the exclusion of all others until you are separated by death.

Why does this matter to God? Why does he want spouses to be faithful to one another for life? This is where we get to the true mystery of marriage. Yes, marriage is sacred, and unifying, and relational, and procreative, but ultimately it’s something else. Something much more significant. It’s a picture of the love between Christ and the church. The love that you have for one another is meant to say something about the love between Jesus Christ and those he died to save. As Paul put it in Ephesians 5:31-32:

“‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

And how does Christ love? He loves us with a *faithful* love. Faithfulness is what led him to love us even when we didn’t love him. Faithfulness is what led him to pursue us even when we pushed him away. Faithfulness is what led him to the cross to die for wretched sinners like us, so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to God. And faithfulness is what will lead him to finish his work in us, so that all who trust in him will live and die by faith.

Christ is faithful to keep his church faithful to him. There is an unbreakable, unending covenant between them. That’s why husbands and wives are called to be faithful to one another, to keep their covenant, and to love one another within the bounds of that covenant to the exclusion of all others.

If you’re here today and you’re not a Christian, I invite you to consider the deep and powerful love of Jesus, and to receive that love for yourself. Jireh and Dorcas have a great love story, but it’s only a whisper of the greatest love story between Christ and the church. Come and see what God has done. Come and taste his faithful, covenantal love.

Jireh and Dorcas, may you love one another as Christ and the church love one another. May your marriage union serve as a beautiful and powerful picture of the union between Christ and those who trust in him. And together, may you enjoy his love for you until death separates you for a time before you are reunited in God’s Kingdom to worship him forever.