

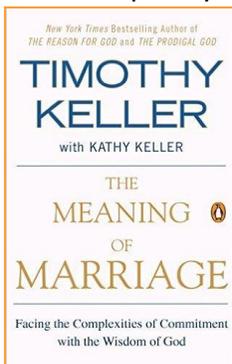
COVENANT: Created to Make Promises

January-February Sermon Series
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
January 14, 2018

TEXT: Ephesians 5:15-33



We continue this morning in our January series on *The Meaning of Marriage*, based on this rich treasure of Ephesians 5. We look at the marriage relationship as a *COVENANT: Created to Make Promises*. We want to contrast the mentality that we bring to how we see it and how the Bible describes marriage as a covenant relationship. That's what we want to explore this morning. Throughout this series, as I mentioned last week, we are pursuing this text in conversation with a contemporary writer and pastor. This book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, by Tim Keller and his



wife Kathy, is the best book about marriage that I know. It has stimulated my own thoughts and affection for my wife and given me understanding into this great mystery that Paul himself says is profound. In case you don't know, Tim is a Gordon Conwell graduate, and he was the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, a church that has grown to have over 5,000 in weekly attendance, many of whom are single. It was a series of messages about marriage to a largely urban church of single people that became the foundation for his book. The reflections on God's Word are deep and profound. He brings to this the experience of a committed marriage, and Tim and Kathy said that like most young modern couples, "we found that marriage was much harder than we expected it to be." Some of you are having the freedom and security in your marriages that you are already smiling, like: "That's right." Others of you are stone-faced right now, thinking: "This has been just exactly like I thought it would be." Tim and Kathy write,

though, that the rationale for the book was that people today need both a brutally realistic and yet a glorious vision of what marriage is and can be. We need both of those things, don't we? We need a brutally realistic picture to wake us up from the fantasies that are offered to us, and yet we need a glorious vision, because the culture will supply you with a very low vision of what marriage is and can be.

There is a contrast in the opening portion of our text. Paul writes to the city of Ephesus, the fourth largest city in the Roman world at that time. It's an urban context. It is a context that has all of the problems that we have today. It is a culture that has a divorce rate of over 50%. It is a culture that is experiencing rapid change. It is a culture that is experiencing an economic boom and the problems that go with that, like increased drug usage and moral failure. So it has all of the 21st century problems, but in the 1st century version. Paul knows in the opening of this passage that there is a contrasting vision of how we are to live, and these opening verses set this up. We mentioned this last week. Note again that Ephesians 5:15 says:

"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise."

There is an unwise vision around you; there is an unwise vision within you, and Paul says you have got to pay close attention. In Ephesians 1:17 he says:

"Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

Don't be foolish, uninformed, or literally, unintelligent, but understand what the will of the Lord is. So, the great promise of Ephesians 5:17 is that foolishness need not be permanent. We don't have to stay in that place of 'unwisdom' or the uninformed. We can actually learn what God's will is. One of the reasons I'm so excited about this series and this passage this morning is just how good our heavenly Father is to teach us how we are to live. You cannot learn these things on your own you. We need God our heavenly father to teach us and instruct us. He communicates His will, and that will be vivid before us this morning.

Paul says in Ephesians 5:18:

"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit."

The ESV says that is *debauchery*. It literally says that is *unhealthiness*, it is *destructive*, so there's an unwise, destructive, foolish way to live, and guess what? We all are familiar with it, and yet we need God's Word to teach us His wise way of living, His will. Then this life that is filled with the Spirit will take us into new territory. Whenever we see the light of God's Word shine upon us, it throws into sharp relief the darkness that we bring to the moment. I want to call out the darkness that's within our culture and within our own hearts right at the beginning—just bring it out into the open, and I hope to clear it from my own soul and from yours.

As a young preacher, I remember one of my mentors, Pastor Dave Hansen—who just retired, by the way, last Sunday after 40 years of pastoral ministry. As a young preacher, I would often have too much material, and as a good mentor, Dave gave the best instructions in the context of a golf outing. We were teeing up, and he said: “David, you have a fertile, exegetical imagination.” I thought: “Thank you, that sounded like a compliment.” Then he said: “You know, when you're preaching, you have to decide what you're going to go for,” and then to illustrate that, he took the golf ball, teed it up, and said: “You have to pick one club. You can't swing all these at the same time: one club and just hit the ball as hard as you can.” So I want to bring out before you what I'm actually going after this morning, and I want to remove these things from my heart and yours.

There are three negative misperceptions about love and marriage that are within us, they are in our culture, and they are addressed by the Word of God.

The first misperception, whether we articulated or not, is that ***falling in love is something spontaneous***, that it's an uncontrollable attraction that is somehow stifled by marriage. Note that even the idiom “falling in love” is like an accident. It just happened. Most of the time, when you fall, it's a negative image. Yet with this one, we think it's something so wonderful: “I fell in love. I was on my way to the grocery store; I tripped on the ice; I hit my head on the pavement; and I fell in love.” That just doesn't make sense, does it? Yet, that's how we talk about it. It's just spontaneous; it happens to you.

The second misperception that we bring to this topic—that we tell ourselves through movies and reading and things we share with one another—is that ***romance and the thrill of emotion associated with it are the key to a successful marriage***. We weave into this misperception that these types of feelings tend to fade over time. We say to ourselves: “If you want to have this great marriage, then first you have to trip and fall in love, and then secondly you have to have this rush of emotion that happens when you get up from falling and say, “Ah, that's so wonderful. When I saw you and I hit my head against the pavement, it just gave me this wonderful feeling, and I want to have that feeling all the rest of my life with you.” We say something like that, don't we?

The third misperception we have is that ***marriage as a commitment is a restriction on our freedom***. We say we don't need a piece of paper to show that we really love someone. When we voice these beliefs, we fall into the trap of what Tim and Kathy call viewing marriage as a consumer relationship, whereas the biblical idea of marriage is a covenant relationship.

Tim and Kathy write:

“Throughout history there have always been consumer relationships. Such a relationship lasts only as long as the vendor meets your needs at a cost acceptable to you. If another

vendor delivers better services or the same services at a better cost, you have no obligation to stay in a relationship to the original vendor. In consumer relationships, it could be said that the individual's needs are more important than the relationship" (81).

But in a covenant relationship:

"These are relationships that are binding on us. In a covenant, the good of the relationship takes precedence over the immediate needs of the individual. For example, a parent may get little emotionally out of caring for an infant. But there has always been an enormous social stigma attached to any parent who gives up their children because rearing them is too hard and unrewarding. Why? Society still considers the parent-child relationship to be a covenantal one, not a consumer one."

But you and I live in a world where:

"The marketplace has become so dominant that the consumer model increasingly characterizes most relationships. Today we stay connected to people only as long as they are meeting our particular needs at an acceptable cost to us. When we cease to make a profit – that is, when the relationship appears to require more love and affirmation from us than we are getting back – then we 'cut our losses' and drop the relationship."

The concept of a covenant or covenantal relationship is something increasingly foreign to us, and yet the Bible says that is the essence of being married.

I remember doing a shared wedding with a pastor, and I had all my notes ready. I had language in the service of describing for this couple that they were entering into a covenant of marriage. As we were going through the rehearsal and came to the point where I was going through the language of covenant, this pastor, who was older than I was and was leading the rehearsal, cut me off and said: "Oh, I don't use that language anymore." I asked him why, and he said: "Well, people just don't understand; they don't use the word covenant. They don't understand what it means, so I don't use it anymore." In my youthful zeal, without really thinking, I said: "Well, you need to explain that to them." He gave me this wide-eyed look like: "Who are you, and why am I officiating the service with you?" You see, covenant is unfamiliar, and we need it, so let's talk together from God's Word about what a covenant relationship is.

Gordon Hugenberger was one of my professors at Gordon Conwell, and his PhD dissertation was a 400 page treatise on *Marriage as Covenant*. I have reread it this week and it is excellent. Gordon Hugenberger defines covenant in this way:

"Covenant is an elected relationship of obligation under oath" (*Marriage as Covenant*, 11).

Each of those terms is important. Marriage is not a natural state. It is entered into by choice, selection, a movement of the will. Marriage creates a relationship that was not there before.

This relationship is a familial bond. Note that marriage is a covenant, and a covenant is an elected relationship; it is a relationship of obligation. In other words, there are requirements, there are duties, there are stipulations, there are things that should, ought to, or must be done. Marriage creates an elected relationship of obligation under oath. Unlike consumer relationships, covenant relationships invoke a third party, the Lord. He is the protector; He is the defender; He is the witness to the covenant. Notice in our text there are ubiquitous references to the Lord. In Ephesians 5:22, it says:

*“Wives, submit to your own husbands, **as to the Lord.**”*

He is invoked as a third-party of this covenant relationship. In Ephesians 5:23, the husband is depicted as acting in such a way that Christ becomes visible:

*“For the husband is the head of the wife even **as Christ** is the head of the church, his body, and is Himself its Savior.*

In Ephesians 5:24, we read:

*“Now **as the church** submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”*

That describes the relationship dynamic in a marriage. In Ephesians 5:25, we read:

*“Husbands, love your wives, **as Christ** loved the church and gave Himself up for her.”*

This invoking of God as the third party sets marriage apart from consumer relationships and sets it clearly in the context of a covenant relationship. Our clearest indication that the Bible views marriage as a covenant is in Ephesians 5:31 where Paul says:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

There is no introduction to this. There is no Scripture reference given, but this statement in Ephesians 5:31 is actually a quotation. There is no convention in the first century for printing in italics, but if there were, this would be in italics, because Paul, as he is describing marriage and the conduct of our lives within marriage, thinks back to that very first relationship of Adam and Eve. He quotes Genesis 2:24. After God had created Eve and brought her to Adam, Adam burst into poetry, the language of an oath, in Genesis 2:23:

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

Then our verse, Genesis 2:24:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

I want to tell you about just a small experience of exegetical euphoria I had this week. It was an about page 200 or 250 in the *Marriage As A Covenant*. I think for years, right up until last week, if you had asked me what this last phrase of Genesis 2:24 means, that the two shall become one flesh, I would have told you that it's describing the physical union of a husband and wife. That's what I thought it was. Well, as I dug into the text, I realized that is not the imagery. I got excited about that because every time we learn a little more of God's Word, it opens up new paths for obedience. The idiom in the Bible for physical intimacy, which we are going to talk about in a couple weeks, the biblical idiom for that is to *know someone*. Adam knew his wife, because physical intimacy should be the expression of relationship at its highest level. It is a radically different perspective than our culture would offer us today, but again that is a couple of weeks ahead. Instead, to become one flesh is a very common biblical idiom for something else. Becoming one flesh is the biblical idiom for describing one's family or kin. The term *flesh* in the Bible refers to the members of your family, your kinsman. The designation of another person as your flesh identifies him or her as a member of your family, and that implies within it requirements of caring and loyalty. Becoming one flesh then refers to the establishment of a new family unit, the bondedness of a familial bond in this, and so Hugenberger's definition is a good one: that covenant is an elected relationship; it is chosen; it is freely entered into, but it is a relationship of obligation. I grew up in a household that hardly ever used the word *obligation*, and yet I've grown to love the word obligation because the Bible's vision of freedom is not the absence of commitment. It's having the right ones: "a relationship of obligation under oath" (163). A marriage covenant begins with a promise, a promise before God.

I love officiating weddings, and I love walking couples through the service. We get to this point when people are worried about their vows. They ask: "Will I forget my vows? Will I look awkward?" Some people say that, and I tell them I will prompt them for everything. Others will say: "Will people be able to see me clearly while I'm taking my vows?" and I tell them: "Don't worry about that. What's most important in taking your vows is not people seeing you, but who you are looking at." I love to tell them that there are actually three sets of vows. The first vows that you take, you are facing God. You face forward; you don't look at each other at all. I get to ask you: "Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife? Do you promise to love, honor, cherish and protect her, forsaking all others and holding only unto her?" And the groom says: "I do." That "I do" is said to God, not to the spouse. Then the question is asked to the bride, and only after invoking God as the third party, the protector, defender of the covenant relationship, do the bride and groom get to turn and face each other. They face each other and repeat: "I take you to be my wife, to have and to hold in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer. I promise my love to you." You first make a promise to God and then to one another. Love and law go together in the Bible. Duty and delight are two sides of the same relationship, and so the Scripture addresses that first misunderstanding. When we say that falling in love is

something spontaneous and uncontrollable, attraction that might be stifled by marriage, the Bible says “No, it’s not that way at all.” Love is the response, not to spontaneous desire, but love according to the Bible and the wisdom of God needs a framework of binding obligation to make it full and what it really should be. A covenant relationship is not just intimate despite being legal, but it is a relationship that is more intimate because it is legal. Making a binding, public vow to another person is an enormous act of love in itself, isn’t it? Someone who says to you, “I love you, but we don't need to be married,” might as well be saying, “I don't love you enough to curtail my freedom from you.” That's less attractive, isn't it? but, that is what is really being said. Tim and Kathy say:

“The willingness to enter a binding covenant, far from stifling love, is a way of enhancing, even supercharging it.”

When you're dating or living together—and as I mentioned last week, cohabitation is on the rise in our culture—people, when they talk about it, say: “I am sort of just testing it out,” like you would test drive a car. That falls right into the category of viewing this as a consumer relationship. “I’m not to sign any long-term contract. You might snore, for all I know. Or you might not cook hash browns in the way that I like them,” something ridiculous like that.

“When dating or living together, you have to prove your value daily by impressing and enticing. You have to show that the chemistry is there and the relationship is fun and fulfilling or it will be over. We are still basically in a consumer relationship, and that means constant promotion and marketing. The legal bond of marriage, however, creates a space of security where we can open up and reveal our true selves. We can be vulnerable, no longer having to keep up our façades. We don’t have to keep selling ourselves” (85).

God's Word is right. Falling in love is not a reaction to spontaneous desire that is uncontrollable. Love is a response to that binding covenant obligation.

Let’s look at the biblical perspective on romance and the key to long-lasting marriage. We tell ourselves that romance and the rush of emotion are the key to a successful marriage, but the biblical perspective is, instead, that the power of promising is the key to enduring love. It is an elected relationship. That's why it is also so dangerous if you're going through a rough patch to jump on Facebook and see how your high school friends are doing. It is dangerous because you don't really get a real picture of who they are, and they certainly don't get a real picture of who you are. Often when we first begin a relationship, we experience a surge of emotion, but if we are honest and we look back, that emotion has a lot of ego in it. There's a lot in that beginning of just the rush of thinking someone who is beautiful, attractive, and intelligent likes me, and you feel great about it. But, it is not the same kind of love that a marriage has and that a strong marriage has over time.

Again, Tim is at his best when he says:

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial.

To be known and not loved is our greatest fear.

But to be known and loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God.”

To be known, really known, and to be loved, oh, that’s good. Really good. “I really know you, and I love you!” In that power of promising our love and covenant is the key to enduring relationship.

The last misunderstanding is that binding ourselves in a covenant would limit our freedom. We use idioms like: Being married is like having a ball and chain around our ankles, and other truly low statements about it. But, when someone says, “I don't need a piece of paper to show love,” you might just want to say, “Yes you do; yes, you actually do.” If you love someone the way that the Bible describes the love of two people, you should have no problem making a legal, permanent, exclusive commitment, and this kind of love then allows for real freedom. We tell ourselves that freedom is the ability to make choices. That is not at all what the Bible describes as freedom. When we free ourselves from obligation, what we end up doing is collapsing into tyranny. When we free ourselves from obligation, then we end up doing whatever we want to do. That's what we call freedom, but Jesus says: *“If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.”* Real freedom, according to Jesus, is not the absence of commitments, but it is having the right ones. Our daughter is getting ready to go back to college in just few hours. It's been exciting and wonderful to have her home. I love the illustration of a freedom of obligation. She's playing the piano, and the commitment to practice seems from the outside like such a restriction on freedom: you're just tied to the instrument for hours. Yet, it's that right commitment that opens up the freedom of playing and enjoying beautiful music. Inside the space that is created by the covenant relationship, the power of the promise, we have real freedom, and the freedom of marriage inside the covenant space that's created is very different from the consumer relationship. The consumer relationship does not have any real power to change us, but a marriage relationship actually changes us over time. How does it do that? It does that through the freedom that's given to exercise three powers, and I want conclude with these.

The first power that is free to operate in a covenant relationship, one that is not even on the table in a consumer relationship, is the **power of truth**. Marriage brings two people into closer contact than any other relationship can bring them. Not only do see each other close up, but you are forced to deal with the flaws and sins of one another. What are the flaws that your spouse will see? You may be a fearful person with a tendency toward great anxiety; you may be a proud person with a tendency to be opinionated and selfish; you may be an inflexible person with a tendency to be demanding and sulky if you don't get your own way; you may be an abrasive or harsh person who people tend to respect more than they love; you may be an

undisciplined person with a tendency to be unreliable and disorganized; you may be an oblivious person who tends to be distracted, insensitive, and unaware of how you come across to others; you may be a perfectionist with a tendency to be judgmental and critical of others and to get down on yourself; you may be impatient, irritable, with a tendency to hold grudges; you may be a highly independent person who does not like to be responsible for the needs of others and who hates to ask for help; and you may be a person who wants far too much to be liked and so you tend to shade the truth and you work too hard to please everyone. None of us are all those things, but all of us are some of those things, and you start living in close proximity with another person and that's going to come out in sharp relief, and that's the moment when you can have the freedom to exercise the power of truth. The power of truth can be exercised only inside the covenant commitment. A consumer relationship will never tell you the truth. They can't because they don't want to risk losing your business. A used-car salesman can't say: "I have to tell you the truth. You know, you can't really afford this." The grocer can't really tell you: "You know what? You don't look like the healthiest person, and so half of the items on this belt need to go back on the shelves. You need get down to the organic section. You need to start taking your health more seriously." There is no power to do that, but inside the commitment that says: "I promise my love to you in spite of your flaws." The power of truth is not to be resisted, and I want to challenge us this morning. I challenged you last week, with an easy one: Say to your spouse: "How can I serve you?" Some of you found that easy; some found it hard. This is a little harder, but I want you to give your spouse the freedom to exercise the power of truth, for you to say: "Will you speak the truth to me? Will you help me see just who I really am?" Ask that question and then be real quiet and listen. To exercise the power of truth may sound discouraging at first, but it is really the road to freedom, and it has the power of dislodging and healing our brokenness. Tim uses the illustration of a 10-ton Mack truck driving over the bridge of our lives. He says:

"There are hairline cracks in a bridge, and yet when a 10-ton truck drives over it, those cracks widen and really get revealed. Your spouse is sort of like a 10-ton truck driving over your life. You can resist it. You can deny it, but only in a covenant relationship can you exercise the power of truth."

The second power has to go with it, and that's the **power of love**. Marriage gives us the freedom to exercise and express the power of love. Marriage puts into your spouse's hands a massive power to reprogram your own self-image. The love and affirmation of your spouse has the power to heal you of many of your deepest wounds. The power of truth will bring your flaws to light, and you want to release the power here honestly, but you also need to exercise the power of love that says: "I see you, and I love you." A spouse has this tremendous power to remake us. You know, as a pastor, I sometimes get credit for things that I didn't have anything to do with. Sometimes you say things to me that are so complimentary, and I appreciate

hearing that, but often it's the work of someone else. Or you say: "Oh, that was a great sermon," and I think, "All I'm doing is explaining the Bible. It's really just a great passage." But, when my wife says something that says, "That was really insightful," that just lights me up. The spouse has this unique power, and it's no accident that Paul commands husband three times to "love your wife." The power of healing love and marriage is a miniature version of the love of God. The power of truth and the power of love have to be exercised together. Are you with me so far?

Now comes the really hard one. This is the one that will make or break your marriage. You see, we live in a fallen world, and in a covenant relationship between a son of Adam and a daughter of Eve the power of truth and the power of love come into conflict and tension. There's the problem. My wife does not learn about my sins the way a doctor does. She does not learn about my diseases of the soul the way a physician would. She does not learn about the anxieties and fears or anger within me the way a counselor would. My wife knows my sins because they are so often committed against her. She knows I'm insensitive, because I'm insensitive to her. She knows I'm selfish, because I'm selfish to her, and this is the great problem of marriage. The one person in the whole world who holds your heart in his or her hand, whose approval and affirmation you most long for and need, is the one person who is hurt more deeply and more often by your sins than anyone else on the planet. Right? That's a big problem, and the power of truth comes into conflict with the power of love. "I see the truth of your flaws. I want to exercise love towards you, but your flaws have made a direct impact on my life and state of being right now."

So we have this third triumphant power, and that is the **power of grace**. Consumer relationships cannot offer this to you; truth without love ruins the oneness, doesn't it? When your spouse is just critical all the time and no love, the oneness breaks up; love without truth gives the illusion of oneness, but stops the growth. "I love you, and yet in reality you're hurting me, and I'm just swallowing it." At some point it is going to explode. The solution is grace. Only if we're good at forgiving and very good at repenting can truth and love stay together. You have got to be good at forgiving for a marriage to flourish, and you've got to be really good at repenting for it to flourish. Repentance is when the power of truth comes unsolicited into your midmorning and you say quickly and earnestly, "I'm really sorry." When we first got married, I thought: "I'm never to be one of those husbands who misses the anniversary. I am not going to be that guy. That will not be me. I'm going to get out in front of this thing." So, I thought: "I've got the perfect plan. I'm going to set the four-digit pin on my bank account for my anniversary. Done!" I programmed it in. I went through the first year. In the back of my mind I thought: "I've got this. I know this. It's my pin." Well, I mis-programmed it. I had one shot to get that right and I missed it by two digits, and that sin, flaw, that pride, that arrogance compounded itself

because for a whole year, with every transaction, I just seared into my memory the incorrect date of my anniversary, which to this day is difficult to dislodge and re-program. I think: "What's my anniversary? No, that's not my anniversary. That's my bank account," and when your wife is smiling at you and nothing is planned for that day, then you go, "I'm really sorry!" That's the power of repentance. You have to be very good at that—quick to say, "I'm sorry" and mean it. And then you have got to be good at saying, "I forgive you." You cannot create the power of grace. You can only reflect it to other people if you've received it from Christ. If you've received grace from Jesus Christ, who did not treat you as your sins deserve, then you can extend grace to one another.

One of the first things you can do to renew your marriage is freshly recommit yourself to Jesus Christ. This portion of God's Word challenges us, and it roots out those misunderstands, doesn't it? Love is a response to commitment, not spontaneous. Romance, a surge of emotion, is not the key to lasting marriage, but promising our love to one another is. Inside the freedom, the real freedom that a covenant commitment brings, we have those very powerful three things: the power of truth, the power of love, and the power of grace to share with one another. God's Word teaches us that marriage is a covenant relationship. We were created and we are at our best when we are making promises. Let's keep them. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we praise You this morning for teaching us. We need Your instruction, Lord. We ask You to forgive us where we have neglected Your wisdom and where we have taken in the teaching of our culture or the aspirations of our own fallen heart. Lord, forgive us and renew us, we pray. Be at work among us. I pray for the relationships here at Kenwood, for the marriages in our church family. I pray for those who are single and considering being married. I pray for those who have experienced heartache or broken relationships, that You might renew them and restore them in Your way and in Your season. Lord, we love You, and we desire to honor You with our lives.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.