

Central Baptist – January 2023
Message #7 – Covenant Marriage

Forging A Covenant Marriage

- Tom Cowan

(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 01 as Tom walks up) We stand at the beginning of a new year – like untouched sand on beach that no one has walked on – no footprints from previous visitors. It is full of the unknown – and so we tend to think that whatever happens in this year is entirely out of our control. I would like to share with you this morning that we can actually control a great deal of what is in the future. We will learn how we can do this.

We return this morning to the Decalogue – the 10 words from God that establish fenceposts for our lives keep us safe in a world that has slipped into moral chaos.

Today's word – (SHOW SLIDE 02) you shall not commit adultery.

Whenever I speak on those parts of the Scripture that focus on marriage I have several genuine fears and some honest hesitations.

Some of you are now walking alone because of the death of your life partner and I want to be sensitive to you. Some of you have known God's grace in a second marriage. I am acutely aware that some of you may have experienced the pain of divorce. You entered into marriage with the highest of hopes and dreams – for better or for worse -- and it turned out for worse.

Some of you are single and my fear is that this morning you may feel this does not relate to you. Please listen anyway. This may help you in the days ahead.

My last fear is personal – I do not want you to assume that because I preach on marriage – I have it all together – I do not – I bring the truth from God's word – and I am still in process. To all of us who are married -- this is both an invitation and a challenge for us to strive higher. As usual this leaves so much behind.

When the Israelites entered Canaan – they were commanded to cut down the Asherah – these were sacred objects – but crudely sexual in style and purpose – behind this command to cut them down was the expectation and the demand that this covenant nation was to have a different ethic regarding sexuality and marriage. More than ever I am convinced that in the Ten Commandments we find the practical word from God about how to live in a foreign culture – in some ways just as morally

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confusing and sexually tempting as Canaan was going to be for the Israelites. Our society has its own Asherah – sexual symbols that have to be destroyed.

Our starting point must be to understand that all of us – all the time – look at all of life through what is called a worldview. This is the lens through which we see everything. Someone has said – we do not see things as they are – we see things as we are. Sometimes the worldview is a conscious and deliberate one which we have formed. Many times it is unconscious – we do not decide what it is – we may not recognize what it is – but we are always looking at life through a lens.

As Christians we might like to think and say that our worldview is made up perfectly by the Word of God – by prayer – by the nurture of a Christian mind. But we are often far from that reality. Our worldview is also comprised of what we see on television – what we read in the newspapers – the data that bombards our minds and assaults us every day. Television and especially sitcoms have done a great deal to normalize a lifestyle that is contrary to Scripture.

In our society today - Over 40% of Canadian marriages end in divorce – Which is about the same as people who claim to have a faith-based life.

Fewer than half the present generation will reach 18 with both parents still living together.

In the spring of 2005 the Canadian Government passed Bill C-38 which allows same sex marriages. For those who are confused between morality and legality and do not understand the difference – what is now legal is therefore often understood to be moral.

These negative statistics can easily create a lens that puts marriage and family out of focus from a biblical norm. We can easily end up living closer to the cultural norm than to the Biblical standard. This is the seduction of our hearts and the breakdown of the Christian mind. The reality is – the more persistently and steadily we look at things that are out of focus – the more we may assume that they are normal – and so we end up living in this distorted view of reality.

It is against these social distortions and this sexual distortions – what we might call the modern day Asherah – the sexual totem poles of our day – it is against these cultural abnormalities that God calls his people to stand as a holy nation and as a royal priesthood.

It is another way of saying the well known challenge in Romans 12 – “...do not be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. “

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There is a word that we need to rediscover today – a word we need to revive especially in our biblical vocabulary and Christian thinking – that word is COVENANT. It is a word we need to start to use again – to speak again – to believe in again – to weave into our lives again. It needs to be a key word as we forge a biblical worldview.

The Hebrew word to describe the heart of God is HESED. **(SHOW SLIDE 03)** It means faithfulness – loyalty, lovingkindness, mercy, steadfastness, unfailing love.

Hesed describes the nature of his covenant love for us. It is to become a key word in our worldview – it is to be at the very centre of the lens through which we view all of life – and our understanding of marriage and sexuality.

This morning we are going to explore this word covenant as it relates to marriage.

(SHOW SLIDE 04) COVENANT FIDELITY GIVES US THE FREEDOM OF COMMITMENT.

We start in God's garden – where everything began and still begins.

Genesis 2

(SHOW SLIDE 05) 18. The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Up until now in creation everything had been declared good – now for the first time something is not good – it is the solitude or the loneliness of the man. Someone is needed who will complement him – be his helper – that is not a demeaning word – the same word is used in the Psalms to describe God.

(SHOW SLIDE 06) 20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.

(SHOW SLIDE 07) 21. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh.

(SHOW SLIDE 08) 22 Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

(SHOW SLIDE 09) 23 The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman, ' for she was taken out of man."

(SHOW SLIDE 10) 24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

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25 The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Whenever I have asked people who just lived together why they chose to do that – the answer is often – we did not want to make a commitment. They are afraid of making a lifelong commitment so they say -- we just live together -- we are going to see if it works out first.

Yet if there is freedom FROM commitment – we also need to see that there is also freedom IN commitment. Of course there are freedoms that we surrender when we enter into a lifelong covenant with someone else – there are things that we give up – but as we walk through that narrow door of commitment --- we enter into a deeper world of a different kind of freedom – now there is freedom **IN** commitment.

This means that some of the questions and alternatives we used to think about have been answered – we no longer have to think about them – some of the options we used to consider are now closed. The commitment we accept sets us free.

There is an old Anglican wedding service vow that says –

I bind myself to you for life – I have chosen you – and from now on my aim will be not to search for someone that will please me – but to please the one whom I have chosen.

That is covenant loyalty – and we learn that from God – who has a single-minded jealousy – a determined passion towards us – he says I am committed to you – and under that canopy of a promise-keeping God - we can say to another human being – I am committed to you. That means that we control much of the future – it is not unknown chaos.

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(SHOW SLIDE 11) COVENANT LOYALTY GIVES US THE FREEDOM TO GROW.

I hear from time to time – I don't want to be stifled by marriage. Well actually neither do I – neither does Harriet -- I don't think anyone does.

But a covenant marriage that is rooted in deep loyalty is not one that stifles us – rather it encourages us to grow as people – in our creativity – in our individuality -- it is where we mutually assist each other to become the person that God fully intends us to become.

At marriage services couples often want to light a unity candle – they take the two single candles and they use them to light a unity candle. We understand the symbolism of this act. – I remember at one wedding rehearsal we had worked all this unity candle bit out – what they were going to do – then when it came to the actual ceremony – they took the two candles – lit the unity candle – and then in a way that was not rehearsed – they blew out the two candles representing their own individual lives. I almost wanted to stand up and scream – no! – don't do that. You are not being extinguished.

A healthy marriage does not suffocate or smother our own individuality -- rather it gives each of us a place to grow. A healthy marriage involves three people – you – me and now us! We have created a new person in marriage – us!

Paul Stevens (well known in Vancouver and Regent College) describes 6 kinds of loyalty in his book Married For Good.

(SHOW SLIDE 12) ATTITUDINAL LOYALTY – we cherish and value our spouses – thinking the best of them and for them. When we cherish people – it is not hard to do thoughtful things for them.

(SHOW SLIDE 13) VERBAL LOYALTY – it means the way we talk to them and about them.

(SHOW SLIDE 14) SPIRITUAL LOYALTY – we are brothers and sisters together in the grace of God. We are people mutually gifted – how can we encourage the gifts in our spouse – how can we help them to grow.

(SHOW SLIDE 15) DECISIONAL LOYALTY – it means that we will make decisions together and we will stand together in what we have decided. Nothing divides a couple faster than when one says – look what YOU have done!

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(SHOW SLIDE 16) HEART LOYALTY – old wedding vow says – *I pledge thee my troth.*

Troth is an old word – more than truth – it means truthfulness. It is when we bring our heart.

Last but not least – **(SHOW SLIDE 17) PHYSICAL LOYALTY.**

We understand that there is one thing that is to make our marriage relationship different and unique from every other relationship we have – it is the dimension of sexual intimacy.

The word – do not commit adultery – was a word to protect and guard marriage in a sexually promiscuous culture.

At a basic level it means physical adultery – because that act by its very doing breaks the exclusive nature of marriage.

Jesus speaks into almost all the commandments – and in his usual style – Jesus does not let us off with what the commandment means on the surface – he exposes its heart.

(SHOW SLIDE 18) Matthew 5

27. "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'

28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

The Pharisees were the experts at legalisms – they could define adultery – they knew exactly what it was -- it was sexual intercourse -- it was ending up in bed with someone who was not your spouse – they could declare that they did not cross that line. But Jesus knows as we all do – that there is a lot that can happen that does not cross that line – adultery starts in the heart.

Let me give you a definition of adultery –

(SHOW SLIDE 19) Adultery is anything which we nurture in our heart which interferes with the growing intimacy with our spouse.

Pornography is adultery – it visualizes and brings another sexual partner into the relationship – it stimulates what 1st John calls -- the lust of the eyes.

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Some years ago I had a mistress who almost ended our marriage. I was like many men who out of moral integrity would never think of ending up in bed with someone else but who are in fact adulterers – they have a mistress another lover – and my mistress is my work.

The church I pastoring was growing – I was working long hours – out almost every night – but I had left Harriet behind.

Harriet confronted me with this – and I had to address it head on and change - or we would not be married today. It would have been my fault. I shared this some years ago at a Pastors and wives conference – and it got very, very quiet.

Remember my definition -- **Adultery is anything which we nurture in our heart which interferes with the growing intimacy with our spouse.**

Healthy marriages are not free from stress and challenges - rather they are forged by hammer and by heat as two people commit day after day to covenant loyalty – as two people keep their promises – as two people give each other the freedom to grow and to change – Covenant loyalty allows us and encourages us to change and grow together.

(SHOW SLIDE 20) COVENANT INTIMACY GIVES US THE FREEDOM TO LOVE.

Some time ago I read a comment in a book in which the author saw a parallel in our society between credit cards and premarital sex – that puzzled me until the writer went on to explain – the connection is - we are unable to wait – we want it **now**. The shallowness of our society is seen in our movement towards instant gratification.

You cannot turn a relationship back once you have been to bed with someone – there is no such thing as casual sex - it is an intimate act with someone.

The Bible has 3 different pictures for sexual intercourse.

(SHOW SLIDE 21) #1 – Procreational Sex:

When Sarah seems unable to conceive a baby with Abraham – she comes up with a culturally acceptable alternative – she says Abraham should sleep with Hagar her maid – **to go into her** – Genesis 16:23 in NASB - it is procreational sex.

(SHOW SLIDE 22) #2 – Recreational Sex:

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Genesis 39:7 – Joseph is in Potiphar’s house – a warm day – everyone is out except his wife – and so she says to this handsome young man – come lie with me – recreational sex- which is sex without commitment. Joseph ran from the house – you RUN! He was falsely accused of rape – led to 13 years in prison.

(SHOW SLIDE 23) #3 – To Know:

That is why the Bible uses a simple but profound word to describe our sexual intimacy in marriage – it is *to know*.

The truth of being one flesh with someone is a deep and intense way to describe this covenant intimacy. It means being with someone - and as Genesis says - being naked and not ashamed – which has very little to do with taking off our clothes – it is being with someone with whom we can share our dreams – our hopes – our fears – where in the intimacy of each other’s arms we can laugh and we can cry. It is where we can be vulnerable – naked - and yet we know we are safe.

The only safe sex today is to retain our virginity before marriage – until perhaps one day we will bring ourselves as an intimate gift to someone in celebration – the only safe sex is to be faithful within marriage – and to guard other relationships outside the covenant fence of marriage.

In The Song of Songs we find a whole book written to celebrate this kind of covenant sexuality – it is the delicate portrayal of a wedding night. In the intimacy of covenant marriage – we do not just meet as body to body – we meet as soul to soul and spirit to spirit.

Our culture tells us we need to find ourselves – God calls us to be counter-cultural – which means we lose ourselves. Covenant sexuality invites is to experience what it means to serve each other in this intimate way – to lose ourselves for the sake of the other person.

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So we live in changing moral times – the flickering candle of a biblical morality seems to be getting snuffed out. But this moral eclipse can also be the stage for biblical witness. We will never have perfect marriages – or perfect families – or perfect kids – Scripture does not offer us this kind of utopia – but if we will do the hard work of building covenant marriages that have credibility and authenticity in these darkening times – as the moral sun fades – people will be drawn to look for answers.

Our society discovered that the free love of the 60's was not free – people were more afraid of herpes than hell – the materialism of the 70's has left us bankrupt – the humanism of the 80's was a striptease – and the spirituality of the 90's was the road to nowhere – we are lost – and we have been seduced.

But somewhere in this moral wasteland – in this spiritual wilderness – there must be a people who are not sexually disoriented – not morally confused – not relationally perplexed – they are the people who have heard the voice of God from the fire on the mountain – and who will echo with Israel – all that the Lord has commanded we will do.

In a few moments we come to communion – and it is built on this truth called COVENANT.

Ask that everyone has bread and wine –

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In this bread and wine we meet a covenant-making and a promise-keeping God. So we do not have to be afraid of all the unknowns that lie ahead in this new year. God has said – I will be with you – I will go ahead of you – he says - nothing can ever ever separate you from my love.

Prayer for Bread: we thank God for his faithful presence

Prayer for Wine: The cup is the new covenant for us.

So we enter 2023 under the banner of a Covenant-making promise -keeping God. 2023 is not out of His control – He knows all that will happen – and his faithfulness removes our fear and gives us confidence.

? Hymn about Covenant: Great is Thy Faithfulness.

People be seated.

Within that covenant – there nests another covenant – a smaller one – but with the same characteristics of love, faithfulness and commitment – it is called marriage. When we make covenant promises to another person – we can control the unknowns of the future – because we are saying – I will be there with you and for you - no matter what.

For those who may have lost a covenant partner in the last year or so – you may treasure the memory of that covenant.

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Some years ago – I came across a little poem for all of us who are married --
SOMEONE ASKED ME TO NAME THE TIME
THAT FRIENDSHIP STOPPED AND LOVE BEGAN.
O MY DARLING – THAT’S THE SECRET
OUR FRIENDSHIP NEVER STOPPED.

55 years ago this year I nervously waited at the front of a small church in Scotland and I watched a lovely young lady walk down the aisle and stand beside me – we entered into a godly covenant with each other -- she has loved me through the darkness of depression that lasted about a year – I would not have made it without her – she has sat at my bedside through a long night when a surgeon told her that I probably would not make it till morning.

I may know more Greek words than her – but she has better emotional intelligence than I have.

I am nervous about public speaking – I especially feel the responsibility of opening the Scriptures – she often holds my hand just before I step up to the pulpit – she whispers to me -- just relax and do your job. She often reminds me that the Spirit will land His word in people’s lives where and how He wishes.

Together we have prayed for people in ICU and anointed them with oil – asking that God would bring them through to health -- together we have sung to people as they closed their eyes and slipped from this life through that thin veil and into the presence of God.

I am so much more with her than without her.

We cherish every day that God has given us – and we will be grateful for each day that is still to come.

ASK YOU TO STAND –

Prayer partners will come forward in a few minutes to pray with you at the end of the service.

If you are married this morning and you stand beside your spouse – at the beginning of this new year – you may wish to take their hand -- can you quietly and deeply renew your commitment and resolve to grow in that kind of covenant loyalty to each other –

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so that you can walk the miles of the road together – the best of friends and the best of lovers.

To all of us – this is the blessing of God –

**The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”**

**Thank you for being here either in person or online - see you next Sunday – God
bless you!**