

“Till Death Do Us Part” Series

#3: “To have and to hold from this day forward” (covenant love)

May 24, 2015

Weddings are pretty weird!

- My parents worked with the Massai in Kenya for several years. Among the Massai the father of the bride will bless his daughter at her wedding by spitting on her head and spitting on her breasts. That seems rude, to us. She then leaves the village without looking back – that seems appropriate after being spit on!
- In Germany they sometimes celebrate the Polterabend. On the night before the wedding guests will bring ceramic plates and bowls and whatever and smash them. The couple has to clean it up showing that they know marriage will not be easy, but they can work together through the messes of life.
- In Borneo the newlyweds are confined to the house for 3 days after the wedding – and they are forbidden to use the bathroom. Because if they do either one or two, there could be bad luck, like the death of a child, or infidelity, or a broken marriage. I’m telling you, marriage is for the young if you’re going to do it there!
- In some places in Europe they have these love-lock bridges. This one is in Paris. Newlyweds fasten their lock to the bridge, then they throw away the key, a symbol that they will be locked together forever.
- Now this one could catch on in Kentucky. In China the groom shoots three arrows at his bride. Without tips, by the way. He then fetches the arrows, and breaks the arrows and the bow, ensuring they will love each other forever.

Well, here’s what we do. I’ve performed quite a few weddings, most of them pretty normal. We usually start down here. The groom comes in from my left. The bride comes down the center aisle, escorted by her dad, or her brother maybe. She stands here on the right. So the groom is on the left, the dad is in the middle, and the bride is on the right. But they are all kind of facing me, at first.

And then I ask the groom something like this: “Will you have this woman to be your wife, to live together in the holy covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and,

forsaking all others, will you be faithful to her so long as you both shall live?” And he answers ...? Now, who is he making his promise to? He’s not talking to the bride yet. ... Then I turn to the bride and ask her the same questions.

Then we usually climb the stairs, and then they face each other, and they take each other’s hands, and the rest of what they say is to each other. “I take you to be my wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward. (Now that’s quite the promise! And it gets tougher ...) For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. As God is my witness, I give you my promise.” You ever make a vow like that? Did you understand what you were saying?

I don’t know what show it was, but apparently a couple was having an argument over whether to get married. He wanted to; she didn’t. And finally she blows up and says, “Why do we need a piece of paper in order to love one another? I don’t need a piece of paper to love you! It only complicates things.” No kidding!

And, the way most people think, she’s right! Most people kind of assume that love is an emotion, a feeling, a romantic passion. And a piece of paper isn’t going to make that any stronger; in fact, it might weaken it. But if marriage is not about an emotion kind of love, a feeling love, a romantic love; if marriage is about a “covenant” kind of love, then her response was tragic. You see, a covenant love isn’t measured by how many strokes you receive, it is measured by how much you are willing to give to this person, how much you are willing to lose for this person, how much freedom you are willing to give up for them, how much of your time, how many of your resources you are willing to invest in them.

You see, when someone says, “I love you, but let’s not ruin it by getting married,” what they are really saying is this: “I don’t love you enough to close off my options; I don’t love you enough to give myself to you that unconditionally.” You see, to say, “I don’t need a piece of paper to love you” is pretty much the same as saying, “My love for you hasn’t reached the level of a covenant love required for godly marriage.” Now, that’s kind of a different way of looking at it, isn’t it? Is it right?

You see, it's really about two different kinds of love. There is a "feeling" kind of love, and there is a "covenant" kind of love, and they are very different. Now I suppose the feeling kind of love is the one most people are looking for. It's the love of romance. You know how it feels, I hope: Your heart starts beating faster, your palms may get sweaty. There is this excitement as hormones like dopamine, and norepinephrine, and serotonin flood into your system. Your pupils dilate, your cheeks flush, your lips may swell a little. You lean in, entering their personal space. You may start playing with your hair, staring into each other's eyes, even mirroring each other's body language. As a college professor it was fun to watch the kids get smitten with a feeling kind of love.

But feeling love is a consumer kind of love. I'm willing to give love as long as I get a good return. Is she meeting my needs at an acceptable cost? You see, if the relationship requires that I give more love than I get back, then at some point you've got to cut your losses. And if someone else comes along who gives a better return for your investment, there is no real obligation to stay with an inferior vendor. After all, it's about being happy, isn't it? And if she doesn't make me happy any more, move on. And if someone else can make me happier, move on. Because – a feeling kind of love does not, cannot last forever. You buy that? If you don't, you will.

But a covenant love ... now that's different, that's way different. Look at what we do in a wedding ceremony. We start down here. The groom is on my left, dad is in the middle, the bride is on my right. They are facing ... me. They are making a promise, not really to me, but to God. I'm just up here asking the question for God. I ask the guy, "Will you have this woman to be your wife, to live together in the holy -- covenant -- of marriage ... as long as you both shall live" And he promises ... God, "Yes I will." I ask the girl, "Will you have this twit to be your husband, to live together in the holy – covenant – of marriage ... as long as you both shall live?" She promises ... God, "Yes, I will." You see, there is a vertical vow in a Christian marriage. We are not just making a promise to each other; we're making a promise to God.

And then when the couple comes up here on stage, they face each other, and they hold each other's hands, and they make a horizontal promise – a promise to each other. It's seems redundant. They are going to restate what they have already affirmed. But it's really not redundant, because it's

a different audience this time. The first pledge was to God, this time it's to each other. He says, "I take you to be my wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward... until we are parted by death. As God is my witness, I give you my promise."

You see, they are making a covenant, and a marriage covenant has a vertical and a horizontal dimension. It's a promise to God, and a promise to a partner. And here's the deal: if you break your promise to your partner, you're also breaking your promise to God.

The Bible uses the covenant when it talks about marriage.

- The very first book of the Old Testament records the very first wedding ceremony, in the Garden of Eden. It says, "A man leaves his father and his mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." (Gen 2.24) I actually like the way the old King James Bible put it. It says, "A man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife." That word "cleave" is strong. It's like the husband and wife are super-glued together; it's kind of like they are welded together.
- In the very last book of the Old Testament, the prophet gives God's people a tongue lashing. He says, "You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant." (Malachi 2.14) Marriage isn't just about romance, it's about covenant.
- In Proverbs Solomon scolds a woman for a sin he becomes quite good at. He says, "She has abandoned her husband and the covenant she made before God." (Pr 2.17) We make a promise to each other – that's a horizontal promise, and we make a promise to God – that's a vertical promise. And if you break your promise to your partner, you're breaking your promise to God.

And here's what's so hard for us. You see, the groom is not telling his bride that he loves her at that moment; and the bride is not telling the groom that she loves him at that moment. That's kind of obvious. They are promising that they will love each other "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death." It's not an affirmation that they love each other today; it's a promise that they will keep loving each other tomorrow, no matter what happens.

I read about some kids who wrote their own vows. They said something like this: “I love you, and I want to be with you.” Well ... Duh! That’s romantic, that’s sweet, but it’s a wussy vow. A covenant vow isn’t a vow of present love, it’s a promise of future love. And that’s hard. Because you don’t know what’s coming. And you may not realize that the emotion you are feeling today, the flush of romance you are feeling today – that won’t last. At its best, it will come and go. And a covenant vow is my promise that I will love you no matter what: when I like you, and when I don’t; when you are loveable, and when you’re not; when it’s easy, and when it’s flat out hard ... till death do us part.

You see, covenant love is not a feeling kind of love, it’s an action kind of love. You’re telling your partner, I’m all in. I’ll be there with you when you are captivating, and I’ll be there with you when your body fades. I’ll be there for you when life is great, and I’ll be there for you when life is one mess after another. I’ll be there when I like you, and I’ll still be there when I don’t. Because I am not an animal, and I will not be ruled by my emotions. And if I start to feel something for another woman, I will choose to say no. And when my feelings for you fade for a time, I will choose to stay with you, loving you. I will love you more than I love ... love.

Well ... is that romantic? It’s not what they sing about in our love songs, it’s not the kind of love they talk about in the movies! It’s not the kind of love advertised by eHarmony, or Match, or OurTime, or even ChristianMingle.com. They are stuck on a feeling kind of love, a romantic kind of love, a consumer kind of love. But I’m talking about something infinitely stronger, infinitely better – a covenant kind of love ... the kind of love that builds great marriages. So what makes it better? ...

I don’t do too much of our counseling anymore. We’ve got Diana on staff as our counselor, and she listens better than I do, and she’s nicer than I am, and smarter. But when I did more counseling I used to suggest this strategy a lot. Your marriage is struggling, your feelings for each other have faded, the tensions are building, what do you do? Well how about this: Just treat her like you would if you still liked her; just treat him like you would if you still liked him. Just behave like a good husband or a good wife would. Maybe the feelings will come back. In fact, it’s about the only shot you’ve got to help the feelings come back. And even if the feelings don’t come back, you’re still keeping your promise to God. You’ll still be

able to come into his presence unashamed, and you'll still be able to look in the mirror with some dignity.

Guys it really works; here's how: Actions of hate lead to feelings of hate, and actions of love lead to feelings of love. Did you get that? Actions of hate stir hate, and actions of love stir love. You guys know that C. S. Lewis is one of my heroes. He says, "Don't waste time bothering whether you love your neighbor, just act like you do." Well it works in marriage: "Don't waste time bothering whether you love your husband, or your wife, just act like you do." You see, if you hurt someone you dislike, you will dislike them more. The more cruel you are, the more you hate; and the more you hate, the more cruel you will be. It's an ugly spiral – and you see it in marriages all the time. But works in reverse, too. If you keep acting with love, even when the feelings are gone, slowly the feelings will come back. If you keep loving the unlovely, eventually they will become lovely again to you. So we keep asking that question we talked about last week: "What would a great husband do?" Guys, you do that. "What would a great wife do?" Ladies, you do that. It works, guys. It's the way God loves us. He doesn't love us because we are lovely; we become lovely because he loves us.

Now you can do it. In fact, we all do do it ... as parents. How many of you parents have ever loved a kid you don't like? If you are a parent and your hand is not up, you're lying like a dog. Sometimes kids are lovable, sometimes ... But let me show you what lurks inside your kids:

- Kid 1: They look so innocent.
- Kid 2: Now don't look at the girl, look at the little kid to her right. That's your kid.
- Kid 3: Ever been there, done that? That's not innocent.
- Kid 4: That little girl is not sad because of what she did; she's sad because you want to kill her.
- Kid 5: Guys, those are real horns; that's not hair. All kids have them.
- Kid 6: They'll embarrass you.
- Kid 7: They'll worry you.
- Kid 8: They'll horrify you.
- Kid 9: In fact, you'll be convinced that your kid was switched at birth.
- Kid 10: Enough said.

And yet we parents keep making these enormous sacrifices for our little barbarians, even though, to be honest, we get very little in return. In fact, often, when they get older, kids go through these stretches of rebellion or they fall apart and they require enormous investment on our part. But we keep on loving them. Sometimes we don't feel the love, but we keep on loving them. And our love for them gets deeper, and deeper. And when they are 16, or 17, or 18, and unattractive to so many others, they are precious to us. You know why? Because we have loved them with a covenant love. We keep doing the actions of love even when we don't like them much.

Now, wouldn't it be something if we loved our spouse with the kind of covenant love we give our kids? If we kept acting with love until the feelings came back. But too often we give covenant love to our kids, and a consumer love to our partner. And when the kids leave home we still love them, but our marriages are empty. Guys, it doesn't have to be that way. It's not God's way. It's not God's kind of love.

We touched on this last week: The Bible says, "Husbands love your wives; wives love your husbands." It's a command, so it's not about a feeling – because you can't command feelings. God is telling us to act with love when the feelings are there, and he is telling us to act with love when the feelings are not there.

Guys, every spouse – every spouse – will fall out of love with their partner from time to time. Feelings just come and go. It's scary when they go. It's even scarier when your feelings start to attach to someone other than your spouse. So we Jesus followers choose to act with love even when the feelings are gone – that's covenant love. And we Jesus followers choose to detach our romantic feelings from anyone other than our spouse. Because that's covenant love. And as we do that, over and over and over again, our love for our partner grows deeper, and our love grows richer, and the dark places become fewer, and more tolerable. Guys, a covenant love is so tough. It's the only kind that will build a great marriage. It's the only kind that will build a marriage you'll be proud of.

You guys ever hear of an old dead guy named Homer? He wrote the Iliad and the Odyssey? There is a story about the warrior Ulysses and the Sirens. The Sirens were these beautiful, enchanting, and extraordinarily

dangerous women who would lure sailors toward their islands where they would shipwreck on the treacherous rocks. Their voices, their songs were irresistible – men would literally go mad trying to reach them. Well Ulysses wanted to hear their voices, but he didn't want to kill his men. So before they sailed past the Sirens he told his men to stuff their ears with wax so they couldn't hear the Sirens, and he told them to tie him to the mast. And they were to keep sailing past the islands no matter what he yelled. And his plan worked.

Well that's kind of how covenant love works. With your vows – to your spouse and to your God – you tie yourself to the mast. So that when you hear the Sirens – and you will, because everyone does – you stay bound to your partner till your mind clears. The rope is your vows. You see, if yours is a feeling love, a romantic love, a consumer love – your marriage falls apart, because you are not tied to the mast. But if yours is a covenant love, your vows will get you through the tough patches. And it will be worth it. Last week I gave you a stat. 2/3 of the marriages that are unhappy today will be happy marriages in 5 years – if they stick it out. You see, this isn't about making your life worse, guys – this is about building a great marriage.

You see, reality is, a romantic love can never take you that deep. In romance, most of us keep so much hidden, especially early on. We try to look our best, we try to act our best – we are attentive, we are so careful. Because if we let down, they might push us away. We are scared to make ourselves fully known, because a feeling love, a romantic love, a consumer love is so fickle.

But a covenant love ... You see, when I know my partner is all in ... Listen guys, to be loved but not really known is cool, it's fun, but it's superficial. To be known and not loved is perhaps our greatest fear – which is why we keep so many secrets. But to be fully known and still be fully loved, that is to be touched by God. And that's what a covenant love is all about.

You see, young love, a romantic love, a feeling love is cool; it's fun. But in reality, he really doesn't know her, yet; and she doesn't know him, yet. That's okay. Truth is, they are more in love with love than they are with each other. And that's okay – for a time.

But a covenant love is so much deeper, so much more profound. To be vulnerable, to risk letting someone in. To let someone know you, beneath your masks. And they still love you! To know that they are not in love with love, but they are in love with ... you. They have seen who you really are – you are a jumbled mix of strengths and weaknesses, and they're still committed to you. You have faced countless messes together; you have sinned against each other so many times, and been forgiven so many times, and he still holds her hand, and she still holds his hand. This is not a love devoid of passion; it's just a deeper passion than the love you felt in the days of naivete. Your love is no longer a shallow stream; it has become a deep river.

One more piece. This is so big. Guys, we become the promises we keep. We become the promises we keep.

- Now there are some who think their feelings define them. I am what I am most passionate about; I am what I feel most deeply. But guys, feelings are fickle, and they are subject to so many things beyond our control.
- And there are some who think their achievements define them. I am what I do; I am what I have done – here's my resume. But resumes, achievements, leave so much of our character unrevealed.
- And there are some who think their dreams and their ideals define them. I have all these big dreams! But our dreams, and our ideals only tell people who we want to be, not what we really are.
- In reality, who we really are is most clearly revealed by the promises we make ... and keep.

One of the most famous men in English history is Thomas More – a man of principle, and courage, and faith. When he was sentenced to death, his daughter begged him to say whatever his enemies wanted him to say, to save his life. Here's what he told his daughter. He said, "When a man makes an oath, he is holding his own self in his own hands; like water – if he opens his fingers then, he needn't hope to find himself again." Well, 41 years ago I made a promise to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her so long as we both shall live." When a man makes an oath, he is holding his own self in his own hands. Like water, if he opens his fingers, he needn't hope to find himself again.

When Julie and I married, we had no idea what we were getting into. How could I know how much she would change? How could she know how much I would change? Julie has lived with many different men over the past 41 years – each of them me. What has held it all together was a promise, a promise of covenant love.

Some of you, I suppose, will listen to this and push back: “I’m sorry, I can’t give love if I don’t feel it! I won’t fake it! It’s just not right.” Okay. But the apostle Paul tells us something so convicting. He says, “Husbands, love your wives – just as, just as, in the same way, with the same love with which – Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Wow! You see, when Jesus looked down from a cross he wasn’t thinking, “I am giving myself to you because you are so attractive to me.” No, he was in agony; and he looked down at us ... denying him, abandoning him, betraying him, and in the greatest act of love in history ... he stayed. He stayed. He loved us, not because we were lovely to him; he loved us to make us lovely. That is how he wants us to love our husband or our wife – with that same kind of covenant love.