

Throughout this series, we've explored what it means to be a whole person and how to relate with other people, especially spouses. We saw that our culture subscribes to a Romantic view of marriage, a Fairy Tale Script where Cinderella and Prince Charming meet, fall in love, get married and live Happily Ever After. That story is all about what happens Before Happily Ever After. Culturally, we're not prepared for the marriage that comes after the wedding, about the lives we live *After* Happily Ever After. We saw that if we truly want a marriage to succeed, we have to find it on the Gospel of Jesus, not on Romance. We've spent the last five weeks charting out what that looks like.

We're taught that Marriage and Romance are about becoming complete. We say that we're all 1/2 souls, looking for our missing puzzle piece, that person who will make us whole. But we saw that the Scriptures teach clearly that to look to marriage to complete us is Idolatry. Romance can't complete us. Rather, we find wholeness in Christ and the Church. Until we learn to seek our wholeness in God, we cannot find success in relationships.

What's really dangerous about the Romance Script, the Soul Mate thinking is the unrealistic expectations it puts on marriage. Seeking compatibility first actually runs contrary to God's intentions for marriage. Marriage is supposed to sanctify us. To change us, to make us more like Jesus. We get to practice, day in and day out, giving ourselves up for someone who's not like us.

Nowhere is the difference between Romance marriage and biblical marriage more apparent than in our approach to sex. In the Romantic view, sex is about intimacy and pleasure – it's ultimately selfish. But when our sexuality is ordered appropriately, according to the Scriptures, our whole lives are more balanced, more whole. Chastity, which means healthy, self-giving sex with our spouse and no one else ensures all our relationships are whole.

We crave wholeness. And we understand at some level that we find it in relationships. We were created for relationships. That's why they're so powerful, and why they're so easy to get wrong. Throughout this series, we've returned to the picture of Marriage we find in Ephesians 5.

**"As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one." -- Ephesians 5:31-32 (NLT)**

Marriage should present God's love to the world. All our relationships should model God's love, but marriage especially is an opportunity for us to model the faithfulness God demonstrates to us in the way we're faithful to our spouses.

And it's the friction between what we're called to be and what we too often end up being that highlights the conflict we're exploring today: The difference between God's Covenantal Faithfulness and our Contractual Faithfulness.

The bedrock of our culture is the contract. It goes back the Enlightenment, to thinkers like Thomas Hobbs and Jean-Jacques Rosseau, who gave us the concept of the social contract. This is the model of humanity our constitution is based on and how our culture thinks about itself.

The core idea of a contract is two individuals enter into a legally-defined relationship that is mutually beneficial. AT&T and I have a legally defined relationship. They're the provider and I'm

the customer. I give them money (which they want) and they give me cell phone service (which I want).

Contracts are pretty simple math equations:  $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} = 1$ . AT&T service + my money = 1 satisfied customer (usually). But we recognize that equation. This is “soul mate” math. I’m a  $\frac{1}{2}$  person looking for that other  $\frac{1}{2}$  person who will make me whole.  $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} = 1$ .

Contractual faithfulness is in the fabric of the Romance script. I’m an individual, and I need something. So I enter into this relationship with this other individual (who’s thinking the same things) and we complete each other. This relationship is mutually beneficial.

Contracts are a form of cooperation. Each person gives something, some piece of themselves, in exchange for something from the other person. Good contracts are balanced - both parties feel the exchange is fair. No one wants to get ripped off. But what happens when a marriage, a romance is unbalanced? What happens when one person voids the contract?

If AT&T doesn’t give me adequate service, I am free to break my contract. In fact, I’m not just free, I’m encouraged to. People will tell me, Man, you need to drop AT&T. You need to check out Verizon. They’re way better. And if I grow, if my needs in a phone provider change and AT&T can’t meet those needs anymore, if I move to a place they don’t offer service, I break contract. It’s painless. It’s not emotional. Because it’s just a contract.

But relationships? What happens when one partner just doesn’t feel fulfilled anymore? What are you supposed to do when that other person isn’t meeting your needs, isn’t helping you be better or isn’t giving you your space or something less tangible that you just can’t really put into words but it’s not like it used to be and you can’t really put your finger on it but you just have this sense that it’s not really... right... anymore? What do you do?

Well. If the other person broke the contract, if they’re not holding up their end of the deal, if they’re not meeting your needs, fulfilling you, then you break the contract. If their half isn’t contributing to your whole anymore, then you get out of the relationship. The Romance is over. The Marriage is over.

Breaking a marriage for the same reasons we’d break a contract is pretty socially acceptable today. Moreover, it’s morally commendable. The message we hear is that you shouldn’t be in a marriage that makes you unhappy. That hey you were young and you shouldn’t be tied *forever* to a decision you made when you were just a kid. That it’s really all *their* fault anyway because you tried (all your friends will affirm that) but sometimes people change and that’s just how it is and really do you want to stand in the way of each other’s happiness? You’ll both be better off in the long run. You’ll both find someone who better completes you. And sign a new contract.

We like faithfulness, but not at the expense of our own best interests. It’s a contract faithfulness.

But we weren’t created for contractual relationships. That’s not how God relates to us. From the beginning God has called us to what the Scriptures call Covenant Faithfulness. The whole of the Old Testament is predicated on the covenants God made with humanity. Over and over, God establishes Covenant Relationships with humanity.

God models Covenant relationships, Covenant Faithfulness to and for us. God's faithfulness to Israel isn't predicated on Israel keeping their end of the covenant. No, God is faithful to the covenant because that's who God is. Ezekiel shows us a great example of this. In chapter 16, God is rebuking Israel for how they've been unfaithful, worshipping other gods, committing spiritual adultery (which is the terms God presents their infidelities in). At the end, God says this:

**I will give you what you deserve, for you have taken your solemn vows lightly by breaking your covenant. Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you when you were young, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. Then you will remember with shame all the evil you have done... I will reaffirm my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD. You will remember your sins and cover your mouth in silent shame when I forgive you of all that you have done. -- Ezekiel 16:59-63 (NLT)**

God's covenants with us aren't predicated on our actions. In fact, over and over throughout the Scriptures, we see that even though we are *unfaithful* to God, God remains faithful to us. God is always ready to welcome us back, to redeem and restore us (and that *doesn't* mean our actions don't have consequences – just like Ezekiel said. But it does mean that through it all, God remains faithful to us.)

If we can learn Covenant faithfulness rather than Contractual, we will discover a new depth of wholeness, healthier relationships (not just marriages, but all our relationships).

Contracts are mainly concerned about **me**, about what I can get out of it. But God's Covenant Love seeks the good of the Other. As Jesus said, "**There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.**" -- John 13:15 (NLT). Our covenant love should be about **Them**, not about Me.

Contracts are about each person giving a part of themselves to the other person. In relationships, we're concerned to keep things **50/50**. No person wants to be giving more than the other person. You're each doing your part. You're an equal partnership. But God's Covenant Love gives the whole self for the other person, no matter what they're giving. Jesus gave himself wholly and fully to us and never stopped to ask if we were in or not. God gives and gives and gives. As the father said to the Prodigal son's older brother, "**Everything I have is yours.**" -- Luke 15:31 (NLT). Our covenant love should be **100/100**.

Contracts are about two people who need something, who are missing something and find it in the other person. Contracts are about **two partial-people becoming whole** ( $1/2+1/2=1$ ) in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Contract Relationships aren't truly free to love. Because you're always engaging in Relationship math, making sure that you're not giving too much, that the other person is giving enough, that your needs are getting met. Every gift, every action has a string attached. But when your wholeness comes from God, not that other person, then you're free to give 100% of yourself. You don't have to worry if the other person is giving as much as you are. Because you're not giving to get. You're giving, loving, for the joy giving. *That* is Covenant Love. It's God's love.

God doesn't love us because God needs something. God doesn't need anything (good thing, too – can you imagine a needy deity?!). God is whole and perfect within Godself. In the same way, our

Covenant Love is about **two whole persons (1+1=1)** giving themselves wholly to each other, not to fill a need in ourselves, but because we enjoy imitating and participating in God's self-giving.

Covenant love changes how we relate at every level. Single persons aren't broken half-people who have to be fixed. They're whole, full persons participating in the life of the Church, in God's Kingdom. Single persons are reminders of the sufficiency of Jesus to provide all we need to be fully, wholly human. Single persons actually become a proclamation of God's saving work, a reminder to everyone of what God's self-giving love looks like in tangible form.

Covenant Marriage isn't something I have to do to become a whole person. Marriage is something I can choose or not based on how the other person helps me to give myself more fully. And the marriage itself isn't about meeting my needs, about making me a better person, about the other person completing me. Now, marriage is an opportunity for me to meet my spouse's needs, about me learning to give myself more fully for the good of my spouse. It's something I actively work at, lean into. It's a daily opportunity for me to get up and practice looking like Jesus. Married persons actually become a proclamation of God's saving work, a reminder to everyone of who God is, of what God's self-giving love looks like in tangible form.

Covenant understands Marriage not as two halves becoming one whole, but as two wholes becoming one whole. That's why Covenant Marriage isn't  $1/2+1/2=1$  and it's not  $1+1=2$ . It's  $1+1=1$ . Two individuals who share one life that is greater than the sum of either whole individual. That's the "two becoming one flesh" that Genesis quotes.

And this is why the Scriptures speak so harshly about divorce (hang with me). In a contractual world, divorce is inevitable, and it's not really so bad.. When one person fails to uphold their end of the bargain (whether it's a tangible failure like adultery, or more abstract - he doesn't get me any more, she no longer supports me, they don't meet my needs, I was never really in love, we just grew apart, etc.) - in any of those kinds of cases, when one person voids the contract, the other person is released from it.

But if Marriage is to picture God's Covenant Love, then divorce is the rending of a divine wholeness. That  $1+1=1$  is torn apart. The Scriptures tell us what anyone who's experienced divorce knows: Divorce does leave us broken, half people. That new one doesn't simply become the two old individuals again. That's why God says, **"I hate divorce!" Malachi 2:16 (NLT)**. Many of us already feel condemnation - divorce feels like failure, especially in the Church. But remember: God's words there are predicated on God's covenant love, too. God hates *divorce*. God does not hate *divorcees*. In fact, here's more of the passage:

**"The LORD witnessed the vows you and your wife made when you were young. But you have been unfaithful to her, though she remained your faithful partner, the wife of your marriage vows. Didn't the LORD make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his... So guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. 'For I hate divorce!' says the LORD, the God of Israel. "'To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty.'" -- Malachi 2:14-16 (NLT)**

God hates divorce for the same reason we hate divorce: Divorce breaks us. It destroys, it tears apart. That doesn't mean there aren't times divorce is necessary. Jesus acknowledges in his teaching that in some extreme cases - abuse, adultery - divorce may be unavoidable. But it's not a

first resort in a marriage. It should always and only be a desperate last resort. Something we turn to only after much prayer and deliberation with our faith community.

Our culture turns to divorce far too readily. Divorce has become an acceptable alternative to learning to be married. When marriage gets tough, when we enter the 'stranger periods', rather than allowing the Covenant Love of marriage to transform us, rather than learning to die to ourselves and give up our wants, needs and desires for the good of the Other, we choose to quit, to remain in our self-center.

Please hear me: I am not saying that we should never divorce. I *am* saying that as a rule, we divorce far too readily. Excepting exceptional circumstances - abuse or adultery - divorce shouldn't be on the table. We've made something so costly as divorce far too easy. We don't count the cost to our souls, to our families, to our culture.

If you've been through a divorce, you know what I'm talking about. It was painful for you, for your ex, for your kids. *You* hate divorce like God does, and for the same reasons.

If you've been through a divorce, know that God doesn't hate you. God loves you because you are God's child. And the same hope and restoration and reconciliation available to everyone else is available to you. You are not broken beyond repair. You have not fallen past redemption's grasp. Even now, you God is faithful to the covenant he made with you. Even now, God seeks to restore you, to help you to heal and become whole again. What is before you is greater than what's behind you

For those of you in marriages marred by abuse, you need to get help right now. Don't wait till tomorrow. This is serious and you need to take serious action.

For those of you in marriages teetering on the edge, marriages where the "D-word" has been thrown out and looks more and more realistic, for those of you in marriages where one person has been unfaithful, physically or emotionally or social-medially (yes, it's still cheating): Yes, quitting is easier. And in the case of adultery, it's permissible. But it's not *better*. It's better to stay, to work. To give 100% of yourself to the other person, whether they're reciprocating or not. It's better to stick with the marriage covenant. To work towards and pray for the transformation that only Self-giving love can call forth in a person.

I know that's not a perfect model. Maybe it's too idealistic. Too hard. We can't *reasonably* expect people to do that can we? To model covenant love? To stick it out for better *and* for worse?

Well, actually we can. That's *exactly* what we're called to by Jesus' Gospel. Jesus came to us in all our mess and transformed us by giving himself wholly for us. The confession of the Christian faith is that self-giving love utterly transforms. It doesn't just make bad things good. Jesus' love makes dead things alive.

And that goes for marriages too. Jesus' self-giving love can resurrect dead marriages. We believe that. Jesus' love isn't just for the good times, for the wedding days. It's for all those bad times, the tough times after the wedding day, too.

[[Horseman Interview](#)]

If you've ever been to a wedding, you've heard this:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance... Three things will last forever-- faith, hope, and love-- and the greatest of these is love. -- 1 Corinthians 13:4-13 (NLT)

The love Paul's describing there? It isn't Romantic, Fairy Tale, Contractual love. It's Jesus' love. God's Covenant Love. It's the love God has for us. It's the Love spouses are called to share between each other. It's the love we're called to show to everyone.

If *this* is the Love we're holding up as our model, if this is what we strive for every day in our marriages, in our families, in our jobs and in our church, everything changes. Yes, some of us will still divorce. We live in an imperfect world. We're all still human, we all still fail. But we will be a people for whom redemption and restoration is the rule, not the exception.

The reality is that we are always modeling something. For those of us who bear the name of Jesus, how we live our lives is displaying some god to the world. So the question is, Do our relationships (especially our marriages) model the God of the Scriptures to the world? Does the love we demonstrate look like the world's contractual love or God's Covenant Love?

Here's how the Scriptures describe God's posture towards us:

"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in Covenant Love and faithfulness" Exodus 34:6 (NRS)

"The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in Covenant Love, forgiving iniquity and transgression " Numbers 14:18 (NRS)

"You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in Covenant Love." Nehemiah 9:17 (NRS)

"You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in Covenant Love and faithfulness." Psalm 86:15 (NRS)

"The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in Covenant Love. " Psalm 103:8 (NRS)

"The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in Covenant Love. " Psalm 145:8 (NRS)

"Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with Covenant Love." Joel 2:13 (NLT)

"You are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with Covenant Love." Jonah 4:2 (NLT)

God is slow to anger. Merciful and compassionate. Gracious. And filled with Covenant Love. Does that describe you? Does that describe your spouse? Does that describe your attitude towards the other people in your life? Your kids? Your parents? Your ex? Your co-workers? Your friends?

This is what we're called to. We are called to model this Covenant faithfulness and love to those around us.

Of course that's easier said than done. Contractual love is simpler and frankly comes more naturally to us. But as followers of Jesus we are being made new. We have a new Self and the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us, empowering and enabling us to live lives of Covenant love.

And that can make all the difference in a marriage.

We live in a world of contracts. And that doesn't mean that people who have contractual relationships aren't really in love. What's missing isn't love, it's commitment. It's giving up the right to quit when the going gets tough. It's the decision to stick it out for better *and* for worse. Especially the worse. It's choosing to love regardless of how the other person responds, believing that what matters most is not my own personal happiness, not romance, but becoming more like Jesus. Loving more like Jesus loves. Learning to engage people with truth spoke in love, that self-giving, Covenant-affirming love that took Jesus to the cross for us.

Let us take the steps towards becoming a community that shows the world Covenant, not contracts. Let's be a people who fights for marriage, who mourns divorce because of what it does to those involved. Let's be a people who always believes in second and third and fourth and seventh and seventy-times-seventh chances.

### **Communion Set-Up**

We conclude this series with a symbol of God's covenant love for all of us. As we come to Jesus' table today, we come as people who find our wholeness not in romance, not in relationships, but in God. We come as people who are all journeying out of brokenness into wholeness. And we make that journey by the Grace of a God who will never leave us or forsake us.

The proof of that is here. In the bread that is Jesus' body, broken for our brokenness. And in the wine (juice) that is poured out to restore us to God, to cover over our infidelities.

So as you approach the table today, what does covenant love look like in your life?

Are you single? Become a covenant lover. With your family, your friends, your dating partners, your faith community here. Be a whole person, and learn to love like God.

Are you married? How is your marriage helping you to become more like Jesus? How are you giving yourself 100% for the good of the other person? Is your love unconditional? Are you modeling covenant?

Are you divorced? How are you seeking to heal? What steps are you taking to become more like Jesus right now? How are you embracing redemption and restoration?