

Covenant Love Defended

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Scripture: Matthew 19:1–15

Text: Matthew 19:6b

As we consider God’s commandments, we should see in each of them a portrait of God. When we come to the seventh commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” we come even closer, see even clearer, the heart of God shining through. It may not be apparent right away, since in our world today this commandment is often seen through the lens of the abuse of it. But that has been the evil one’s design from the beginning, namely to take every good gift of God and twist it into something negative.

We want to begin considering the seventh commandment by starting with the highest view we can take, seeing it in its expansive glorious context, and hopefully getting a fresh glimpse of heaven itself. Our text is Matthew 19:6b, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” Under the title of “Covenant Love Defended,” we will examine this passage in three main points:

1. Covenant love with man
2. Covenant love in marriage
3. Covenant love in God

Our Lord Jesus, while upon earth, had a wonderful way of taking a conversation, even a controversy, and

turning it into a precious lesson. We're thinking now of the challenge the Pharisees confronted Him with at the start of our chapter. What a sad question they asked! "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" Think about that question a moment. Does God permit a man to divorce his wife for any reason whatever? Is it okay to dissolve a marriage for literally any reason? What kind of heart wants to go there in such open-ended terms?

If we were asked that question, what would we say? Perhaps nearly all of us would say what Jesus said in verse 9: "Only because of fornication." Though this is, of course, biblical and true, it is interesting that Jesus did not only cite the one exception for a divorce. He also said in verses 4–6 read, "Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Jesus brings the conversation to God's design at the beginning, His created order before sin ever entered the picture. That is where we want to go right now in order to get the most helpful perspective on the seventh commandment with which we can start. So let us begin with God's...

Covenant Love with Man

What do we mean by "covenant?" Today, covenant might mean to most people a simple contract. Some years ago various states in the U.S. tried to establish something called "marriage covenants" in order to try to make it harder to get a divorce and easier to get help with struggling marriages.

When we go back to Scripture, it becomes clear that although the idea of covenant was somewhat familiar among other nations, God's original design was something

very binding and serious. Perhaps the most graphic illustration of this is found in Genesis 15 where God made a covenant with Abram. Animals were slain and divided. Parties were to pass through the midst, emblematic of the dire consequences one calls upon himself if one or the other party violates the covenant agreement. The wonder of this covenant ritual was that the Lord assumed the responsibilities of both parties, as it were, passing through the midst while Abram slept.

So a covenant, in God's eyes, was not something to be broken, was of life and death importance, and should be taken seriously as such. More binding than an agreement, more personal than a contract, covenant involved a relationship, a durable relationship, and ideally a relationship of lasting love.

It is clear from Scripture that such a relationship existed between God and the first man, Adam. Man was made in the image of God, and was designed to reflect that image in the world. Before man sinned, God and Adam might freely communicate with one another, God walking with man in the cool of the garden. And the Lord graciously gave Adam all that he could possibly need while reminding him of His authority over man by means of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil being forbidden to man. If man would honor God's authority and command, he would live in a paradise relationship with God indefinitely. But if man refused to accept and appreciate all that God gave, he would indeed die. That has all the characteristics of a covenant relationship. Still today, many couples conclude their marriage vows with words such as, "Till death do us part," pledging a mutually binding, lifelong relationship of fellowship and love.

It was no mere contract that God established with man. It was a relationship of friendship and love with nothing standing in the way of fellowship and love since there

was no sin yet. One can readily see that this arrangement was all of God's grace. After all, He created man, created the garden, created all things. He gave life to man, created him in God's image so that man could relate to God, appreciate God, understand and love God. We could rightly say God initiated the simplest of requirements for man to remain in a loving fellowship with his Maker, God withholding nothing that man could need, while leaving a solitary reminder for Adam that he owed all to His Creator God.

But we know who broke that covenant bond. It is an enormous mistake and slight against God when we think of man's original sin as nothing more than eating a piece of fruit. That's the devil's way of framing the situation, making God look unreasonable and man's sin as being very, very small. In fact, man willfully and knowingly believed that God was not good but was instead dishonest, deceitful, stingy, and petty. Adam and Eve believed God was not interested in their good but instead was fearful that they, mere creatures, might develop into gods themselves and therefore not even need God anymore. They would be as god, the same sinful desire Satan had when he was cast out of the glory of heaven because of his own rebellion.

But what God did next is the focus of our first thought. You know how this history unfolded. Man broke this covenant bond of love and fellowship with God in the most heinous, thankless, and perverse way. But God, rather than meting out instant death, physically as well as spiritually, displayed something about Himself no one could have expected, especially considering that God is perfectly just. The Lord pursued Adam and Eve, calling them out of their delusion of thinking they could somehow hide themselves and their sin from Him.

Did God call them forth just to tell them their sins? Did He call them out of hiding in order to destroy them?

Indeed, God did show them their sin but not in order to destroy them. After giving what could only be described as a merciful though weighty chastisement, God gave them something they could not have expected or anticipated. He revealed a new covenant. It was a new covenant as far as man knew, but as we shall see later on, it wasn't a new covenant to God. It had simply not yet been revealed to man until that moment in history. Let me explain, since this is very important to understand.

God had said to man that his life of love, friendship, and fellowship with His Maker would continue if man simply honored Him with a simple obedience to the simplest of commands—don't eat from one tree while all the rest of creation, in essence, would be yours to use. If man would vilely reject God's love, God's command, God's rich provision, the stated penalty would be death. Soon enough we see that Adam and Eve's attitude toward God indeed died under the weight of sin. Yet after announcing His chastenings, which were and are substantial, God made a promise, or should I rather say, revealed a covenant, that would allow Him, the Creator, to remain perfectly just, man to become perfectly restored (and more), and both take place in such a way that fellowship and communion might be restored without God compromising His integrity and justice. How could this be? God revealed *Another* who would be born of the woman and yet be such an offspring as would conquer Satan himself. Little did Adam and Eve know that this promised son was none other than God's eternal Son. He would endure the judgment man earned through sin and man would not only find in Him forgiveness of sin but as well a permanent and eternal state of love and fellowship and communion with God!

Of course, Adam and Eve did not know all of this but we know it. Over the course of time, God unfolded His master plan of salvation: who this Son would be, what this

Son would be like, much of what that Son would experience while in this world. All of this unfolded over time in the pages of God's Word. We hold in our hands the completed copy of that master plan, at least as much of it as we need to know to be partakers of that salvation!

So already then, in the first days of the existence of creation, we clearly see covenant love defended—in this first instance, the covenant love between God and man, generally speaking. But God was not finished with His defense of covenant love. Let us turn now to something a bit closer to the seventh commandment itself, though not unrelated to what we just considered.

Covenant Love in Marriage

If anyone knew it would be difficult if not impossible for man to keep all of this in mind, for his own good, it was God. So even before man fell, God made a startling statement—it is not good that man should be alone. Startling, because God had pronounced everything He had made very good, including the creation of man. Startling also because man had the fellowship of God. So we could understandably ask, “Why did God call Adam alone?” But we quickly learn what God meant by these words and it in no way reflected negatively on the rich fellowship of man's life with God. Adam had no created being like himself, none capable of sharing his life on earth or someone with whom he could share his life with God. Certain animals might make nice pets, but they cannot replace a spouse. They are of an entirely other kind than man and are incapable of relating to man like another human being can. For this reason we do not understand what God said to mean that every human being ought to be married. Instead, God is simply and clearly stating that He created us as social beings, beings not meant to live in isolation but rather in community. That is true whether we are married

or not. Some describe one of the severest punishments to be solitary confinement, that is, extended periods of forced isolation. That is what God was referring to, that it is not good for man to live in isolation from other persons. He would have life be a shared experience, including man's life with God.

God therefore created woman, someone like Adam in some ways but different in others. At nearly the same moment God also created a unique relationship involving only two people, a man and a woman. We all know this relationship to be marriage and we can be so familiar with it that we might miss out on what God's purpose was in bringing it into being. We will not now go into God's purpose of populating the earth with image-bearers (Gen. 1:28), or of marriage providing intimate companionship (Gen. 2:18), or of moral preservation (1 Cor. 7:2). Instead, let us focus on two other matters of the utmost importance.

First, we know from Scripture that God is three unique divine persons and yet one unified Being. It is no coincidence that when He described marriage, and also when Jesus referred to it, emphasis was placed on the two becoming one flesh. That is to say this particular relationship, more than any other, is able to portray, in a creaturely way, the very being of God Himself—three-in-one and two are one.

But second, this bond between one man and one woman is not just some contract, a handshake agreement, or even one written out on paper. This is a covenantal relationship. God actually referred to it that way in Malachi 2:14 calling the woman "the wife of thy covenant." As we saw earlier, that's why the marriage oath traditionally contained the words "till death do us part," because marriage was meant to be weighty and substantial, as was the covenant God sealed with Abram. This might help us understand why, in Old Testament case law, adultery was a capital offense.

But when we think of marriage in terms of covenant and covenant in the way it is set forth by God in Scripture, it's no wonder the discipline is severe.

However, just like Adam's relationship with God was, from his side, irreparably damaged by his rebellion against God, so was Adam's relationship with his wife, Eve. No sooner did they fall in sin than they worked together to cover their sin, to hide in their sin. When called out, they blamed the other or another for their sin. Marital troubles and strife have continued ever since because two sinners say "I do" when they repeat their vows to one another and to God.

Nevertheless, the Lord had, from all eternity, something planned which not only would secure a sinner's salvation but also lift marriage far beyond a relationship that now, on account of sin, would end in death. How did God do that?

You recall that not only did God promise that an offspring of Adam and Eve would eventually conquer the evil one and his followers, but through a slain animal's skin, Adam and Eve would have their shame covered by God Himself, symbolic, of course, of the perfect covering His Son Jesus Christ would provide to sinners. But that's not the whole of it. God also revealed, over time, that He *Himself* would be the ultimate spouse, the One who would never be unfaithful, never harm His bride, and that the bride to whom He would join Himself is sinful man! We hear the echoes of this already in the Old Testament. Isaiah 54:5 reads, "For thy Maker is thine husband; the LORD of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; the God of the whole earth shall he be called." In Jeremiah 3:14, God addresses His people this way: "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you." In Hosea, a history that actually portrays God's love for His own, God said this, "I will betroth thee unto

me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies" (2:19).

In the earliest moments of the New Testament, John the Baptist drops this hint, referring to his relationship to Jesus and Jesus's relationship to His people, "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled" (John 3:29). John recognizes Jesus as the bridegroom of His people while he is the one who is privileged to hear the bridegroom's voice. But this picture becomes even clearer as the New Testament continues to unfold.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he addresses the church this way: "For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (11:2). After writing about marriage to the Ephesians, Paul concludes with, "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (5:32). And in the grand realization of God's plan in this respect, John is given this sight of heaven itself in the book of Revelation: "I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2). And again: "There came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God" (21:9-11). The Lamb's wife is not a city as we understand the word, but His church, His people.

So we come to realize that human marriage is preparatory, is symbolic of the ultimate covenant relationship God

has with His children. He doesn't just rescue them, save them, forgive their sins, and in some general way associate with them from time to time. No, our great and holy God, the only living and true God, is willing and has purposed from all eternity to be joined to His people in the most intimate and permanent relationship imaginable—marriage. And this marriage is between one man, Jesus Christ, and one bride, His church, and it will be a perfect relationship of love and fellowship, a sinless love relationship, and an eternal relationship that will grow and grow forever.

We honor His glorious design and intent when we live out our marriage relationship in as close an approximation of this as possible. This is why marriage means so much more than the happiness of two people in this life. It's all about Him, beloved! That will be our focus in our last thought.

Covenant Love in God

Where did all this come from? How did this all come to be in the eternal mind of God? Why is this all so important to Him? The answer to this is the deepest, most profound reason why marriage matters to God the way it does.

There was a covenant relationship forever between God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In that remarkable, everlasting, infinitely perfect and overflowing covenant of love and joy lay embedded another covenant. God not only purposed that a creation He would make would be made so He could reveal His glory in generous display, but He would, in the midst of that overflowing kindness, allow His creation, man, to taste something of that remarkable covenant love that He enjoys within Himself in marriage. Moreover, marriage, when lived in godliness, would serve as a foretaste of that glorious covenant love and fellowship we may have with Him throughout all eternity, in glory and bliss, through Jesus Christ.

So marriage was meant to be an experience, in the bonds of love between a man and a woman, of something God eternally enjoyed within Himself. But that was meant to point our attention to that glorious, remarkable, miraculous purpose of God—to be joined to His church, His people, in a bond that truly is and ever will be indescribable, beyond our highest thoughts.

Can we begin to see, beloved, why marriage has been created by God as one of the foremost pillars of how He orders His world? It is so important to Him that He safeguards it with not one but at least three commandments. Not only are we forbidden to commit adultery (the seventh commandment), but He also tells us not to covet our neighbor's wife (the tenth commandment). Why not adultery and such coveting? Because this is not Him. This does not resemble Him. This does not honor Him or His relationship within Himself. But I said at least three commandments. What is the third? "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (the first commandment). How does that apply? God is jealous over us as His people. He would have us love Him alone. He is our rightful Lord. He is the ultimate Bridegroom. And for man to choose another god, a god of wood or stone, a god of glass and steel, an electronic god, a flesh-pleasing god, a sinful god—this cuts across all God's commandments. This is adultery of the worst kind, an infinitely egregious affront to Him. And because He is so glorious, so infinitely good, to be unfaithful to Him, to abuse His good commands which are designed for our good, may give us some idea why such a thing as hell exists.

Did you ever consider that hell exists because of love? Anyone who could choose sin over God, the God of love, hates Him. God loves His Son too much to excuse those who neglect, despise, and disbelieve Him. God loves justice too much to be unjust, loves mercy too much to see it

despised. Can you perhaps see the connection more clearly now, even just a little?

You see, sin is not just the breaking of a law, a commandment. Original sin wasn't that either, just the eating of a little fruit. Sin is a deeply personal and abusive treatment of our loving God. It is no wonder that God said in Ezekiel 6:9, "I am broken with their whorish heart, which hath departed from me, and with their eyes, which go a whoring after their idols." And again: "They are all estranged from me through their idols" (14:5). Ponder those words, beloved. Let them sink in! God repeatedly used the language of adultery and unfaithfulness to describe how His people dealt with Him through their sins. And the same is true today, except those sins be removed and our relationship restored through Jesus Christ and His blood. This is why Jesus said at the first Lord's Supper, "This cup is the new testament (covenant) in my blood, which is shed for you." He is that new and living way of restored relationships—yes, our relationship with Him but also our frayed and broken relationships with people.

We can try to bypass Jesus and His grace in seeking reconciliation, but that is not the God-honoring way, not a way for lasting peace. In all eternity, God had the way in His heart, revealed it in symbol form when He brought Adam and Eve together, preserving their marriage, and making His intentions fully known through the person, the life, the work, and especially the cross of Jesus Christ His eternal Son.

May the Lord give us strength to take this all in and take it to heart. God's purposes are so great, His thoughts so high, but what a wonder that He lets us see and know something of them in His Word! This is what marriage is all about. This is why God safeguards it the way He does, redeems it the way He does, honors it the way He does, even through the very first miracle His Son performed on

earth, that is, at a wedding feast. Jesus wasn't just being kind to a newly-wedded couple. This is why He came to earth—to seek a bride for Himself!

So the next time you are tempted to look with contempt at your spouse, the next time the thought crosses your mind, “It’s over between us,” think of what you’ve read in this sermon. Look much higher than him or her. Look through the Word into the face of the triune God, seen alone in Jesus Christ, and realize that much more is at stake than the happiness of two people.

May each and every one of us one day be part of that blessed body of Christ, wedded to Him by free and sovereign grace and love, never to know anything but eternal joy, eternal peace, eternal security in the loving embrace of our infinitely good and gracious God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.