
The Meaning of Marriage

Study 2: Consumer vs. Covenant Marriage

Read Genesis 15

A man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery... (Ephesians 5:31-32)

Our Western society is a consumer-driven world in which our lives are constantly consumed with the endless search for upgrades and the best deal that we can find on the market. As soon as we learn how to use the iPhone 6, the iPhone 7 comes out and we feel as if we are missing out on something that could make our lives better and bring us more personal satisfaction. Therefore, we trade-in our perfectly good iPhone 6 and pay \$200 extra dollars to get the new iPhone with the new screen that is a micro-millimeter larger than our old phone.

The problem with this consumer mindset is that it is a lifestyle that is based primarily upon our own personal feelings and desires. Essentially, whatever makes us feel good is what determines the decisions that we decide to make. However, basing decisions that we make on our feelings and desires will ultimately lead us down a long road of dissatisfaction. You cannot be an impulse buyer and live a life of peace and satisfaction at the same time.

❖ *Question #1: Have you ever bought anything that you later regretted purchasing?*

Living our lives with the consumer mindset will make it difficult for us to commit to anything because we will always fear that we are potentially missing out on something better. Especially when our current commitments are not meeting our desires and expectations. Therefore, consumer relationships operate out of a mindset that essentially says, *“Adjust to me, or I’m out of here.”* ***In a consumer relationship, my needs are more important to me than the relationship.***

However, in sharp contrast with our culture’s consumer model mentality, the Bible teaches “that the essence of marriage is a sacrificial commitment to the good of the other.”¹ This comes from the Biblical concept that the marriage relationship is a covenant relationship. Therefore, covenant relationships operate out of the Biblical mindset that states, *“I will adjust to you, and I’m not going anywhere.”* ***In a covenant relationship, my needs are not as important to me as the good of the relationship.***

So what exactly is a covenant? A covenant is a sacred agreement between God and a person or group of people. God sets the terms and specific conditions and then promises His blessing if we choose to obey. A covenant is not merely a contract. We don’t get to negotiate the terms. A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties that holds significant weight and has serious consequences.

❖ ***Question #2: Have you or someone that you know grown up in a divorced family? What consumer-driven tendencies have you noticed in couples that have gotten divorced? What are some consumer-driven tendencies that you’ve noticed in your own life and marriage?***

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, (Penguin Group: 2011), 80.

Whether we realize it or not, when we get married before God, family and our friends, we are in fact entering into a covenant relationship with our spouse. This means that we are not merely looking to add someone to our life because we feel like this person makes our life better, but rather that we are coming together as one with the other person in order to draw closer to Jesus and each another. We might recall that, “[God’s design for marriage] does not offer a choice between fulfillment and sacrifice but rather mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice.”²

So a consumer marriage will remain focused on what we are expecting to gain while a covenant marriage will remain focused on what we are willing to give.

What We Are Expecting to Gain (Consumer)

Consumer relationships are centered around our desires and expectations of what we have to gain from the relationship. Take your relationship with your agent for example. As long as your agent is meeting your needs and expectations at a cost that you consider acceptable then you will maintain that relationship with that particular agent. However, if another agency approaches you and offers you better services at a better cost then you feel free to cancel your current relationship with your agent in exchange for a new one that better satisfies what you feel like you want and need. Again, in a consumer relationship, my needs are more important to me than the relationship.

Trust is obviously crucial in order for a relationship of any kind to remain healthy. In a consumer relationship, our level of trust for someone is directly related to that person’s level of performance. If they continue to do well then

² Keller, 47.

they will continue to be acceptable. Many of us falsely assume that our relationship with God works like this as well, but that is a direct denial of the truth of the gospel. And the reality of this kind of performance-driven relationship is that our performance will inevitably fail to meet our spouse's expectations at some point, and then we will find ourselves overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and shame making us feel like we are never good enough for our spouse that expects so much of us.

In any good relationship there needs to be commitment and transparency. However, in a consumer relationship, those two characteristics won't be able to develop because the fear of exposure (not measuring up) is too great. Therefore, when a spouse operates out of a consumer mentality, they will never truly allow the other person into the depths of their soul nor will they make the effort to truly get to know the other person at that depth either. This creates a marriage relationship that is actually fairly superficial and lacking any real depth.

❖ ***Question #3: In a consumer relationship, performance is central. However, in a covenant relationship, commitment is central. Do you find it difficult to be yourself in your marriage at times? And if so, why do you feel that way?***

So a big question in our modern culture today is, *"Doesn't God want me to be happy? Isn't Jesus concerned about my unhappiness?"* Those with a consumer mentality are primarily concerned with personal pleasure and happiness. Whenever we find ourselves driven by personal pleasure, we will begin to find ourselves becoming deeply selfish, and as a result, we will completely misunderstand the nature of our relationship with God and the pleasure that He desires to give us.

In his book *Orthodoxy* G.K. Chesterton writes,

“I came to see sex, money, power and sensory pleasures as God’s gifts which, in a fallen world, must be handled with care, like explosives. We have lost the untainted innocence of Eden, and now every good thing represents risk as well, holding within it the potential for abuse. Eating becomes gluttony, love becomes lust, and along the way we lose sight of the One who gave us pleasure.”³

In a message that I once heard by Ravi Zacharias, he stated three specific ways in which our desires for personal pleasure can become destructive and illegitimate.

First, any pleasure that distracts you from your pursuit of God is an illegitimate pleasure. (see Judges 7:2-7) When we allow certain pleasures to distract us from the more important pursuit in life then we’ve lost the proper perspective on our purpose for living.

Next, any pleasure that jeopardizes the legitimate rights of another is an illegitimate pleasure. (see 2 Samuel 23:15-17) If the pleasure that you are pursuing violates the rights of another person and somewhat enslaves them for your own personal benefit then its an illegitimate pleasure. Pornography is a good example of this.

And third, any pleasure that creates a central focus upon that pleasure will be destructive to your life and those around you. (see Proverbs 25:16) I love to play golf and of course there is nothing wrong with golf in and of itself, but if

³ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908)

my desire to play golf leads me to play so much that I begin to neglect time with my family then golf becomes an illegitimate pleasure for me.

As we have said, a consumer relationship is based on what we might gain rather than on what we are willing to give. In using sex as an example, it means that we might be willing to give ourselves physically in order to gain physical pleasure for ourselves, but with a consumer mentality we will never give ourselves fully with the most intimate and deepest levels that we could possibly give. This 'holding back' from the giving of ourselves fully will eventually cause more damage and create a sense of distance in the relationship.

Again, in a consumer relationship where performance remains central, we are never really able to be ourselves, and therefore the tension remains high at that address. Our typical reaction is to just masquerade the problem with existential living that just says "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." This kind of relationship will be based on emotional highs, but when the highs fade what will be left?

❖ *Question #4: What are some dangers of wearing a "mask" in a marriage relationship? Why do we try to hide our true identity at times?*

If your personal happiness is what remains central in your soul then you will never find yourself to be fully content in this life nor will you ever fully come to understand who you are meant to be in Christ. Some of us may find ourselves holding a bad hand in life. However, instead of looking to replace the hand we have, we must seek to understand how we might honor God with the hand that we are holding. We must stop focusing on what we are expecting to gain and start focusing on what we are willing to give.

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- ❖ *Question #5: Do you believe our personal happiness is a central theme in our Lord's plan for us? If not, then what is the central theme of our Lord's plan?*

What We Are Willing to Give (Covenant)

In his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Timothy Keller writes:

“When the Bible speaks of love, it measures it primarily not by how much you want to receive but by how much you are willing to give of yourself to someone. How much are you willing to lose for the sake of this person? How much of your freedom are you willing to forsake? How much of your precious time, emotion and resources are you willing to invest in this person?”⁴

True love is a sacrificial commitment to the good of someone else, and therefore true love is more fundamentally an action rather than a feeling or an emotion.

In writing to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul commands, “*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*” (Ephesians 5:25). Paul commands husbands to love. It would be ridiculous to assume that he’s commanding men to have a certain emotion or feeling. You can’t command someone to feel a certain emotion. You can only command someone to take a certain kind of action. *The Bible isn’t telling us to try and muster up certain feelings for our spouse. The Bible is strictly ordering us to act in love towards our spouse no matter how we might be feeling.*

⁴ Keller, 80.

It's a huge mistake to assume that you must feel love in order to give it. Waiting to feel love for your spouse before acting in love toward your spouse sets the table for simple disputes to turn into serious disasters. That is why wedding vows are not a celebration of how much you love someone now but rather a declaration of how much you are willing to love someone in the future. Because there will be times where we may experience a terrible dryness in our feelings of love for the person that we're married to. But if and when those times come, a decision to act in love anyway is the sacrificial commitment that the Bible is calling us to make.

In a covenant relationship, my needs are not as important to me as the good of the relationship, and the standard of love is one that requires a sacrificial faithfulness that doesn't depend on what I may be feeling. It's an elevated standard than the cultural norm, but it's a standard empowered by the truth of the gospel. We are to remain focused on what we are willing to give out of a heart that's been transformed by what we've already been given.

❖ *Question #6: What does service look like within the confines of a consumer marriage versus a covenant marriage? What does sex look like within the confines of a consumer marriage versus a covenant marriage?*

What We've Been Given (Christ)

Throughout the Bible, we see plenty of examples of relational covenants being made between various people, but one of the most prominent covenants found in all of Scripture is the covenant that God made with Abraham at a major turning point in redemptive history. God promised Abraham that a Descendant would arise from his descendants who would bring the blessing of God's

salvation to His people and would establish those people in the Promised Land of His Kingdom (Genesis 12). Abraham believed God when He promised these things to him, but Abraham was still troubled by the magnitude of such a promise. So he asks, *“O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess these great things that you have promised me?”* (Genesis 15:8). And God says, *“I’ll show you.”* And then God orders Abraham to bring him some specific animals (Genesis 15:9-10).

Now, God’s order concerning the animals and then what Abraham decides to do with those animals may seem odd and confusing, but we ought to simply remember that it is only odd and confusing because we no longer belong to that particular kind of culture.

You see, in a sense today, when we decide to get married we make a set of promises to love the person that we are entering into this relationship with (also called vows). We stand up and promise things like, *“I take you, in richness and in need, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live.”* But what if one of the partners in the marriage looks at the person reciting these promises and says, *“I believe what you are saying, but how do I know that you will deliver on these promises?”* And that’s when the person making these promises says, *“I’ll show you.”* And then they sign the marriage agreement.

In our culture, once you sign then there’s consequences for breaking your word. Your spouse can know that you mean what you say because you sign the agreement which proves you are willing to take on the consequences of breaking your promise.

And so in Abraham's day, he lived long before written agreements. As was the custom of his day, specific animals were sacrificed and cut in half in order to make two rows of carcasses with a pathway in between them. The symbolism was simple. The parties involved in this covenant were to walk between the animal carcasses as a declaration that stated, *"If I do not uphold my end of the covenant then may I be cut off and cursed as these animals have been."* So Abraham did what was customary for a covenant agreement in his day and figured that he would walk the path in order to be guaranteed the promise.

However, as Abraham prepares to enter into this covenant relationship with God, something incredible happens.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram... and behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram. (Genesis 15:12, 17-18)

The phrases used for *"smoking fire"* and *"flaming torch"* were the same phrases used at Mount Sinai and in the Exodus for the presence of God. God wasn't making Abraham walk the path in order to gain what was promised; God was walking the path alone as His guarantee of the promise. ***God walked the aisle.***

Essentially, God was saying, *"I, and I alone, will take on all the consequences and the curse of this covenant if one of us doesn't uphold our end of the covenant. You can rest assured in the fulfillment of what I've promised because my promises will rest in my faithfulness and not be dependent upon yours. I will give you what I've promised even if it cost me everything."*

And essentially, it would cost God everything. The depth of God's sacrificial commitment to His covenant relationship with us is revealed in what He was willing to pay through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord Himself was cut off for our unfaithfulness and took upon Himself the curse of our failure to love Him back.

God has never said, "Adjust to me, or I'm out of here." The cross of Christ proves God has forever promised, "I will adjust to you, and I'm not going anywhere."

As God walked the aisle fully committed to us no matter what it may cost Him, may we walk the aisle fully committed to one another no matter what it may cost us. May we forget about what we are expecting to gain and may we remain focused on what we are willing to give out of a heart that's been transformed by what we've been given.

❖ *Question #7: How does the gospel impact your perspective on what the marriage covenant really means?*

Summary Statements:

- ❖ In a consumer relationship, my needs are more important to me than the relationship.
- ❖ In a covenant relationship, my needs are not as important to me as the good of the relationship.
- ❖ So a consumer marriage will remain focused on what we are expecting to gain while a covenant marriage will remain focused on what we are willing to give.
- ❖ True love is a sacrificial commitment to the good of someone else, and therefore true love is more fundamentally an action rather than a feeling or an emotion.