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*Puzzling Marriage: Putting the Pieces Together*  
*The Vow*

Ephesians 5: 21-31

2013 is Chapel Hill's 50th year... our Golden Anniversary. But the Old Testament has another name for it... Jubilee! Every 50 years, God pressed the re-set button on the nation of Israel. In that Jubilee year, all land was to be returned to its original owners, all debts were to be forgiven and all slaves were to be set free. Jubilee was a gracious gift of God that meant hope for the hopeless and a future for those who despaired of their present reality.

This is our year of Jubilee. As a church we are living into that spirit of liberty and hope, and I can think of no place where the spirit of Jubilee is more important to our culture—and to our church—than in marriage. Marriage is the single most important institution in the world, but the failure rate for marriage is huge! And as much as we might hope and expect it to be different, marriages inside the church aren't doing that much better. This morning, scattered throughout the pews, are people holding on to their marriage for dear life... people who have all but given up hope that the dreams they had when they walked down the aisle will ever materialize. These brothers and sisters need Jubilee. They feel like they are trapped and indebted; like their past is wasted and their future is hopeless.

Well, it isn't. It doesn't need to be. We want to proclaim "Jubilee" in every marriage in this house today. So this morning we begin a four-week series on *Puzzling Marriage: Putting the Pieces Together*. There is no question that marriage is a mystery... a puzzle! Anyone who just stumbles down the aisle in hopes that things will turn out like a fairy tale is an idiot. It takes work, intentionality, endurance, study. But then, what good and worthy cause in life doesn't require those things? I believe if we combine that kind of effort with solid biblical principles, this year of Jubilee could trumpet a new future for many marriages in this place.

I start with full disclosure. I love my wife. Cyndi is the most important person in the world to me. I love to do things with her... and I love to do nothing with her. I love to drive in silence with her and to feel her next to me on the couch. My favorite time of the day is bedtime before we fall asleep when we can touch and talk and revel in the unbelievable gift of being able to spend your whole life with your best friend and lover. We are each other's champion, cheerleader, counselor, teaser, and playmate.

So, when you hear me talking about putting the pieces of marriage together, you are listening to someone who, after nearly 24 years, is a huge fan of God's definition of marriage. If you are struggling in your marriage—if you've never experienced what I'm describing—maybe you'll feel like this disqualifies what I have to say. I don't understand what you are going through... don't understand how miserable you are in your marriage. Or maybe you are single. Either way, you might be inclined to just shut down and stop listening. Please don't. Instead, you could choose to say, "What Pastor Mark describes is what I long for ultimately. I want that kind of intimacy, that kind of friendship, that kind of enduring love." If so, please listen.

How many of you like jigsaw puzzles? What are the first pieces you look for? The edges, right? But the most important pieces are the corners. Over the next four weeks, we are going to find the four corners. In addition to scripture, we are using Tim Keller's excellent book, *The Meaning of Marriage*. So, let's get started.

[Read Eph.5: 21-31]

Here's a word we see a lot in today's culture: consumer... consumer confidence, consumer price index, consumer protection, Consumer Reports. Most of us understand that a consumer is someone who buys goods or services. All of us are consumers, and most of us wish to be wise consumers. A consumer relationship assumes that there is a buyer and a vendor. The buyer chooses the vendor that offers the best goods and services at the most reasonable cost. That relationship will continue as long as the buyer continues to feel he is getting the best deal.

But if he discovers another vendor who can offer the same goods and services at a better price, what will the wise consumer do? Change vendors! Nothing personal; it's just business. In the consumer model, the rights and benefits of the buyer outweigh the importance of relationship, right? You may love the manager of Safeway, but if you can buy your granola for \$1 less at QFC, that's where you will go. A wise consumer.

But the model that works well at the cash register doesn't work well at the altar. And yet, increasingly, our culture views marriage from the consumer model. We might not state it quite this glaringly, but our culture has trained us to treat marriage as a business transaction. Marriage is primarily about meeting my needs. As long as my spouse is attractive, attentive, delightful and stimulating to me, things are fine. But when we reach the point where I no longer find my spouse attractive, no longer have strong emotional feelings toward her, where she just isn't as interesting or exciting as she used to be... if it is a consumer marriage, then the natural next step is to change partners. If she doesn't meet your needs—if the "price" that you are paying to be in that relationship is not worth the payout you are receiving—the common sense thing to do is to change partners... get a

divorce. Find someone who better meets your needs, better stimulates you, takes better care of her body, provides more scintillating conversation, and so on.

That may seem harsh, but after 30 years of marrying people—and 30 years of watching too many of those marriages disintegrate—I'm convinced this is the dominant model in our culture and, I am terrified to say, the dominating model even within the church. And for the scores of you this morning who are finding yourself offended at my comments, it might well be because, in your heart of hearts, you realize this is the attitude you bear towards your marriage and your partner. They are not meeting your needs. You no longer find them attractive or stimulating. You cannot imagine yourself continuing in this dreary marriage for the rest of your life. And so, your eyes and your heart have begun to wander... looking for that vendor who will better meet your needs, who will be easier to love, who will make you happy.

Mexico City politicians understand what a consumer marriage looks like. They are considering an ordinance that would allow for "renewable marriage." The minimum marriage contract would be for two years and could be renewed "if the couple stays happy."

Would it surprise you to discover that the consumer model of marriage is not God's model? Then what is the basis, the essence of marriage as we find it in God's Word? Covenant. What is a covenant? A covenant is a promise, a binding commitment between parties that cannot be broken without dread consequences. God is a covenant-making God. He made covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David... in fact, the Old Testament is sprinkled with covenants. Promises made back and forth, promises that bind into relationship.

Ephesians 5 is the most comprehensive teaching on marriage in the New Testament. We will spend the next four weeks mining the depths of that passage. But when we read verse 31—"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"—we are reading covenant-making words that go back to the mists of time. Do you recognize them? Way back at the beginning of your Bible: Genesis 2. We have just discovered that, for the first time in the creation account, something is not good about creation. What was not good? That man should be alone. So God does something about it. He creates a helper from the man's rib and brings her to him. And when he lays eyes on her, he replies with delight, *"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."* And the writer goes on to say, *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."*

There it is in verse 24, Paul's exact quote to the Ephesians. Actually, though, I like the King James version better, "...a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife." That word "cleave" came from the practice of metallurgy. Melt two different metals and pour them together. That is the idea you get from

“cleave.” It is covenant language. It means that in marriage, two persons are poured into one relationship, joined in such a way that they can never really be separated again. They are as close as molten metals poured into the same mold. They are made “one flesh.”

This is covenant language—a binding commitment, a “combining” promise—that knits hearts and lives and bodies and souls together in a mysterious way. But how is that possible? Obviously, in a wedding, two people walk up to the altar, and two people walk away from the altar. Yet somehow, the vows that are taken, the covenant that is made, changes them, unites them, from that day forward. How is that possible? Well, it is an act of God. These are promises that are made, not just to each other in front of our community, but to God as well. What makes marriage the holiest of covenant relationships is that it includes both a vertical and horizontal covenants.

In fact, you see them in the very liturgy of the marriage ceremony. The first vow that is taken goes something like this. “Will you have this woman to be your wife and will you pledge your faithfulness to her in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness, to live with her and cherish her according to the ordinance of God in the holy bond of marriage? Will you?” Notice, that vow is not made to the bride. It is made to the minister and, really, to God. The very first vow is made to God. Only then do they turn to each other, take hold of one another’s hands and say, “I Mark, take you Cyndi to be my wedded wife and I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful husband; in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live.”

The first vow is made to God. The second vow is made to the beloved. That marriage covenant has two parts: a vertical and horizontal promise. And here, right here, is the first corner of the marriage puzzle as God designed it. Covenant marriage. Not consumer marriage. Not convenience marriage. Not “until something better comes along” marriage. Covenant. We make promises before our community of witnesses to God and to each other.

The problem is, we are a culture that does not keep our promises. Gone are the days when a deal is made with a handshake, when a man’s word was his bond. Now, attorneys scrutinize the fine print to make sure that there are no loopholes; no escape clauses. And when it comes to marriage, many couples stand here, in front of minister and community, and make promises like this. [Fingers crossed behind the back]

The starting point for Christian marriage—marriage as God intended it to be—is covenant. Promise! We took vows. We gave our word! Why does this matter? Because, when you get married you don’t know anything! You are stupid! You cannot possibly understand the depth of what you are committing yourself to. You say, “...in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, blah,

blah, blah, whatever..." but all you see going forward is plenty and joy and health. You don't really believe that there can be want and sorrow and sickness. But it will come. And if you view marriage as a commodity, as a consumer transaction—if you don't really intend to keep your vows made before God and witnesses, no matter what then when those inevitable hard times come—there will be no good reason for you not to go wandering in search of a "better vendor."

This week John and Rachel Sehmel came into the church, devastated. They had just discovered that their baby, Luke Anthony—who was 24 weeks along in his mommy's tummy—his little heart was no longer beating. Their world had fallen apart. They never imagined this would be part of their marriage story. Yet here it is. How will they make it through the devastation of this loss? Covenant! They made vows to each other and to God, and those vows provide the glue that will bind them together when the circumstances of life seek to tear them apart. When they made those promises, God melted and molded them together into a single entity called marriage, and they will cleave and cling to and hold fast to each other and to God until their joy and hope and peace returns. And it will.

That's the difference between Bible love and People Magazine love. "People" love is about what I feel... about my emotions. Bible love is about actions... decisions. That is the only way that marriage vows make sense. How can I possibly promise to love my wife until death does part us if love is an emotion? I can't control my emotions. But I can control my actions. I can choose to act lovingly toward my wife, to treat her tenderly, to serve her, to meet her needs before seeking to meet mine, to make her welfare and happiness my priority instead of my own. That's what Jesus meant when he said "Love your neighbor. Love your enemy." It's the only thing He could mean since we may not care for our neighbor and since our enemies, by definition, evoke feelings of contempt. So we choose to treat them lovingly even if we don't feel loving. If this is what is called for in these relationships, surely it is called for in the most important of our human relationships, our marriages.

But doesn't that sound dreary and dry? Who wants to have a marriage that is duty-bound? Where it is all about my obedient actions? Where there is no emotion or affection? Well here's the good news: when we act lovingly toward someone, we begin to love them. The more you act out your covenant of love us the more lovingly you behave us the more lovingly you begin to feel toward that person. It is the surest road toward the lifelong passion and devotion that everyone dreams of when they step up to that altar.

Do you want proof? Think about your relationship with your child. That is still a place, even in our consumer culture, where covenant love exists. We don't change our kids' diapers because we derive emotional satisfaction from it... nor pack their lunches, drive them to practice, deal with their rebellion, struggle through their homework... and their boyfriend problems... and puberty. We don't love any of that, but our covenant love toward our children compels us to do all of those

things. And at the end of the day, when we send them off to college, most of us are heartbroken because we have come to love them so deeply. They are our precious treasures.

If more couples could approach their marriages with the same, selfless, promise-keeping, action love with which they love their children, they would discover that out of that covenant, out of the security that their wedding vows provide, grows a level of intimacy, transparency, honesty and passion that no one-night stand can ever provide.

For those of you hanging onto your marriage by the skin of the teeth, this idea of covenant—of action love that does not wait for or depend upon emotions or passion—may seem lifeless and dreary. But listen to this statistic: two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce or separation ended up happily married five years later. By contrast, just one out of five unhappy spouses who divorced or separated had happily remarried in the same time period.

The essence of Christian marriage is found in this: we make a covenant with God and each other to give our lives in service to one another. It is my calling to love and serve and delight my wife. It is her calling to do the same for me. And even as we are keeping our covenant, God is keeping his covenant... his remarkable promise to melt us down, pour us into each other and create an indivisible whole that will bring the ultimate of love, joy and blessing.

There is more to marriage than covenant as we will discover in the coming weeks. But there is nothing less than covenant. So when you stood before the altar, were your fingers like this? [Fingers crossed behind the back] Our covenant, our vows, our promises are the starting point—the essential starting corner to creating the kind of trust, vulnerability, transparency and resiliency that can offer the depth of relationship for which we all long.

So, to close this message, I'd like to lead us through our wedding vows one more time. The first one, the vertical vow to God. Hold hands, uncross your fingers, look to the cross, listen to these words, and then, I hope, you will reaffirm your covenant: "Will you have this person to be your spouse and will you pledge your faithfulness to them in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness, to live with and cherish them according to the ordinance of God in the holy bond of marriage. Will you?"

## Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
  1. Pastor Mark spoke of the covenant of marriage. What does covenant mean to you? How does that contrast with the "consumer" view of marriage popular in our culture?
  2. What are the elements of a covenant? As you look at your own marriage, what parts of covenant are strong? What need work?