

A Godly Family, Part 5: Covenant-Keeping Love (Ephesians 5:31-32)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on September 2, 2012

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Bill Cosby said that the ability of a man and woman to live with each other day after day is “a miracle the Vatican has overlooked.” Maybe *miracle* isn’t the right word but marriages need God’s help. His gracious help is found in His Word, especially in Ephesians 5. This book gives more than tips and tricks, it totally transforms love by the gospel, a gospel not only overlooked in the rituals of Rome, but many within Protestant Christianity overlook the gospel for us.

Like what about when it’s not just the day-after-day difficulties of married life? What about when your spouse begins to lose faculties at an age you did not expect, or things are radically different than you thought they would be when you get married, or the one you promised to love isn’t easy to love or doesn’t love you in return? Most don’t think of the gospel in those times -- isn’t the gospel for witnessing? But it’s also the power for our marriage to be a witness of the gospel truth of Christ’s covenant-keeping love to His church.

Dr. Robertson McQuilkin has been for decades an evangelical leader and missionary statesman. He was president of Columbia Bible College (now International University) from 1968 to 1990. His ministry changed 22 years ago, to the surprise of many, but not a big surprise to those who knew his character, he resigned his presidency, stepped down from public ministry, and announced his reasons in the school chapel and then in a letter to their supporters.

Unlike other infamous TV “preachers” of his times that stepped down for not being faithful to marital vows, McQuilkin stepped down *because of his faithfulness* to his marriage covenant. His wife Muriel had been suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, and was losing her memory and faculties. He writes: ‘I love her so. And Muriel loved me, too. By then she couldn’t speak in sentences, only words—and often words that didn’t make sense. *No* when she meant *yes*, for example. But she could still say one sentence. And she said it often: “I love you.”’

She not only said it, she acted it. During the latter years of my presidency at Columbia, it became increasingly difficult to keep her at home. As soon as I left for the office, she would take out after me ... Eventually, I approached the board of trustees with the need to begin the search for my successor. I told them that when Muriel needed me full-time, she would have me.

When the time came, the decision was firm ... I wrote a letter to our constituency:

... My dear wife, Muriel, has been in failing mental health for about 12 years ... it is clear to me that she needs me now, full-time. Perhaps it would help you understand if I shared with you what I shared in chapel at the time of the announcement of my resignation. The decision [which he called ‘painful’ but ‘one of the easiest,’ since it] was made, in a way, 42 years ago when I promised to care for Muriel “in sickness and in health... till death do us part.” ... Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more: I love Muriel. She is a delight to me—her childlike dependence and confidence in me, her warm love, occasional flashes of that wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing frustration. I don’t *have* to care for her. I *get* to!¹

I read this week his brief but moving book called *A Promise Kept*, which tells the story of him caring for his wife in this disease for 20+ years at the time of writing (she's now with the Lord with full faculties in greater measure than any of us have). Each chapter of the book is part of the marriage vow he was fulfilling ("In sickness and in health, To love and to cherish, For better or for worse, From this day forward, For richer or for poorer, Till death do us part"). It proved an even more far-reaching ministry after his public ministry

Here is an audio clip of part of his speech.² Dr. McQuilkin was asked by *Christianity Today* to write about his decision and caring for his wife ("Living by Vows," 1990 "Muriel's Blessing," 1996).³ 9 years ago this month, his dear Muriel died at the age of 81, more than 10 years after she stopped recognizing him he still cared for her, cleansed her, washed with water, nourished her. Her childish ways he was able to cherish till he finally presented her to Jesus.⁴

What were the truths that helped him fulfill his covenant vows? I want to come back to that before the end of the message, because that is a question someone asked him that ties together the message about the loving headship of husbands and the covenant nature of marriage, and Christ the covenant-keeper in His vows toward us.

5:23 For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. ²⁴ But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶ so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. ²⁸ So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹ for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of His body. ³¹ FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. ³² This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

Our focus today is v. 31-32, but I wanted to read the context, and consider 2 covenants today: human marriage & Christ's marriage. The bond that keeps husband and wife in covenant-keeping love is Christ-centered, church-loving (loving commitment to their local church), grace-transforming, gospel-driven, covenant-keeping love. It's not based on human will-power:

- it's *Christ-centered* (focusing on Christ above our spouse)
- *church-loving* (i.e., grounded in and cultivated in a church body of believers we love, who love us, help us grow and hold us accountable to covenant vows they witnessed)
- it's *grace-transforming* (as the hymn Amazing Grace says 'grace has brought me this far...grace will lead me home')
- it's *gospel-driven* (remembering the gospel, rehearsing it daily, that I am a great sinner but I have a great Savior)
- it's *covenant-keeping* as a result of, or as the fruit of Christ-centered church-loving grace-transforming gospel-driven love by a man and wife who understand their covenant to each other and the Lord's covenant-keeping love to them

Eph 5:32 says marriage is ultimately about Christ and His church. It's not about us. It's about the glory of God's love story in Christ. As I told you last week, this is a convicting study that I fall short of but I have to be faithful to preach what God's Word says and admit again I am nowhere near a perfect husband (and it's been painfully made clear to me even more this past week). If you think pastors have this mastered, all you need to do to burst that bubble is to talk to Jaime and ask her. But good news for me and you is there is a perfect Husband we can look to in heaven who loved and gave Himself up for us and will help us. And He never falls short and never fails and is always faithful and fully practiced what He preached and fully keeps His covenant and ...His grace in the gospel gives us the resources to pursue His love.

Notice in v. 31: Love that is a Permanent Covenant-Keeping Love

³¹ *FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH*

This is covenant language and it's the climax of Paul's argument. Peter O'Brien introduces it well: 'Now as the apostle moves to the climax of the paragraph [started in v. 25], he cites the text that has provided the substructure of his thought throughout, namely, Genesis 2:24, the most fundamental statement in the Old Testament concerning God's plan for marriage.'⁵ We could argue also from the *New Testament*, how often it's quoted and how it's applied by Jesus and Paul, this very text is the most fundamental foundational defining marriage text in all the Bible.

Jim Newheiser, who has been a biblical counselor for 30+ years, has said that in his experience 80-90% or more of all couples he's counseled have as at least one root issue in their struggles violation of one or more of the key principles in the text Paul quotes in v. 31

1. *Leaving* father, mother (marriage relationship to be priority over parent-child relationship or any human relationships)
2. *Cleaving* (KJV in Gen 2:24 "shall cleave to his wife")
3. *Weaving* together as "one flesh," growing in intimacy/unity

If you're not yet married as you listen to this message, this is how to think about your marital vows before you say covenant promises before God. If you're already married, this is how to think back to your covenant promises to your spouse before God. If for some of you, marriage may or may not be on your future horizon as far as you know, think about the Lord's covenant promises to His bride. And if you're not yet in covenant relationship with Jesus Christ, I pray today you hear His call and commit to Him "I do...till death." Steve Camp sings: "To love [Christ] more than father or mother, to love Him more than even your own flesh. To give all you have for all that He is, that is the gospel according to Jesus."⁶ (Mt 10:37-39)

May you leave father and mother and every earthly thing behind to cling to Christ in faith, your soul weaved to, joined to Him as one, as God causes you to and keeps you close. He says in Jer 13:11: *as the waistband clings to the waist of a man, so I made [My people] cling [same Grk root] to Me, that they might be for Me a people, a renown, a praise, and a glory ...*

God makes His people cling to Him for His renown, praise, and glory, that verse says, and marriages make much of God's renown, praise, and glory as well, when man and wife cling together. It's all about the gospel, or at least marriage should be, and for His glory.

This Greek root for *cleave/join* was used of welding metals together.⁷ That's Paul's word picture for man and wife. Their wedding day is also their *welding* day. You could say 'with this ring I thee weld,' because marriage joins us together like the diamond to the ring. 2 people welded as one, an interlocking gold bond we call wedlock, and like the circle of a ring, it's never to end (Eph 5:25-33 in mine)

The ancient Greek writer Plato used this word for how tightly body and soul are joined together, only to be separated by death. He also used the word for 'stuck together' or people clinging to each other.⁸ It was used of a cement bond for a building, similar to Eph 2:21. In this context, 5:30 speaks of how body parts are joined to the body. To put asunder a marriage in Scripture is like ripping flesh apart. It is equally unnatural to join as *one flesh* without covenant marriage.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 6, where the same writer Paul again quotes this same verse, Genesis 2:24, where Paul makes this very point. The truth of Eph 5:30, we're members of the body of Christ, those in covenant relationship with Him, has implication for our bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:15 *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!*¹⁶ *Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her?* [same root terms as Eph 5:30-31, body/member/join] *For He says, "THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH."*¹⁷ *But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.*¹⁸ *Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.*¹⁹ *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?*²⁰ *For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body*

Marriage is God's context for "one flesh" intimacy. The principle of your body not being your own, Paul explains in chapter 7 *now it belongs to your spouse*. And it's not just about your spouse's good, it's about your Savior's glory. It's about His Spirit and His gospel. You who are unmarried, save intimacy for marriage because of the glory of God, and the purity of the gospel, and the holiness of His Spirit in you, and the price Christ paid for you with His own precious blood. Your body is not yours, it belongs to Christ, and who He joins you with in marriage.

Turn now to Matthew 19 where Jesus quotes the same verse Paul quotes in Ephesians and in 1 Corinthians 6 about the *exclusivity* of the one flesh union. Jesus also quotes Gen 2:24 for its *permanency*.

Matthew 19:3 *Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?"*⁴ *And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,*⁵ *and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'?*⁶ *"So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."*

Malachi 2:14 (ESV) *'But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.*¹⁵ *Did he not make them one ...*

The NASB translates v. 15 a little differently, and the Hebrew text is difficult here, but I think the other translations have it right that v. 15 is also a reference to Genesis 2 (same Heb. words *make/one*). The end of v. 14 in one version: “*wife of your marriage covenant.*” Even with the unfaithful or unbelievers (the context addresses), the Lord says marriage is a covenant He Himself is witness of. Jesus affirmed the same when non-believers asked Him, citing Gen 2:24.

Prov 2:17 says the adulteress ‘*leaves the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of her God*’ (NIV ‘she made *before God*’)

Gen 2:22 *The man said, “This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.”*²⁴ *For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.*

This is God’s plan for marriage from beginning to end, from the beginning of the Bible to its end, a permanent covenant of love to be kept till the end. In the very first book of the OT, very middle of the OT, and very last book of the OT, Genesis 2, Proverbs 2, and Malachi 2, marriage is a covenant that Paul says pictures Christ’s.

Dr. McQuilkin writes of keeping his covenant vows: ‘No one ever needed me like Muriel, and no one ever responded to my efforts so totally as she. It’s the nearest thing I’ve experienced on a human plane to what my relationship with God was designed to be ... unfailing love poured out in constant care of helpless me. Surely He planned that relationship to draw from me the kind of love and gratitude Muriel had for her man. Her insatiable - even desperate - longing to be with me, her quiet confidence in my ability and desire to care for her, a mirror reflection of what my love for God should be. That was [one] discovery- the power of love to liberate in the very bondage imposed by unwanted circumstances.’⁹

He writes of an interview asking him how he’s done it all the years

‘In 1992 the blows of life had left me numb— my dearest on earth slipping from me, my eldest son snatched away in a tragic accident, my life’s work abandoned at its peak ... joy had drained away... my love for God had frozen over. If the only Companion you have in the lonely hours grows distant.... the passion of [Christ’s covenant] love for me never cooled. Even in the darkest hours, when I felt my grip slipping and I was in danger of sliding into the abyss of doubt, what always caught and held me was the vision of God’s best-loved ... in criminal execution in my place. How could someone who loved me that much [the Savior who suffered for me at Calvary] let anything hurt me without cause?’¹⁰

This is where I want to end today as we prepare for Communion. Turn to Lk 22, and I want us to begin to contemplate the mystery: For this reason (gospel picture, Eph 5:32) a Man leaves Father in heaven (Jesus does) to be joined to His bride, and to become “one flesh” with her, as His body, in permanent covenant-keeping love. Both God and Man, He left His Father to be joined to His bride in a covenant of *betrothal*, awaiting the wedding day consummation.

One of the Hebrew betrothal customs in Bible times included a cup of wine given by a man to a woman and if/when she drank the cup the two were betrothed for marriage, in covenant relationship only broken by divorce or death (ex: Mary and Joseph betrothed, Matthew 1).

In Bible times, a Jewish man would pledge himself to a *Ketubah*, a marriage covenant, where he commits himself to love and provide for her in every way, and part of it was payment of a price for her in the event of his death. This all was commemorated at a meal, culminating with the giving of thanks, the bride receiving the cup¹¹

Let's look at Luke 22:17: *And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves ... [Matthew 26 parallel adds "drink from it, all of you ..."]*

It's difficult to be dogmatic or certain of how the Jewish betrothals took place in NT times, but it may be that the imagery here goes beyond Passover to the picture of Christ and His bride (Eph 5:32?). Christ is giving new significance to the Passover cup in a greater way than covenants known to them. Jesus uses the word "covenant" in v. 20 and the betrothal meal was itself called by the Jews "covenant" (Hebrew *B'rit*). One Jewish source says the 'man would pour a cup of wine for his beloved ... This cup represents a blood covenant. If she drank the cup ... they would be betrothed. The young man would then give gifts to his beloved, and then take his leave. The young woman would have to wait for him to return ... [the wedding that came later was a glorious celebration, and the saying of thanks would include]"You are blessed, Lord our God, the sovereign of the world, creator of the fruit of the vine." Following these blessings, the bride and groom again drink from the cup of wine'¹²

Luke 22:20: *And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is **the new covenant in My blood** ...*

It says in a Study Bible they've found *ketubah* dating to 300 BC, solemn marriage covenants, one-sided contracts the man would say aloud and sign committing to die to self, deny self to provide for.¹³ Along with the giving of thanks the man pledged to give of himself

Look at what v. 19 says: *And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me."*

Ephesians 5 uses the language of bride of Christ and body of Christ interchangeably for the church. We believers are the body of Christ and we look back in communion to remember His physical body as given for us on the cross, and we look around us at the table at the spiritual body of Christ that we're to discern rightly and be in unity with, and we're to look forward to His physical bodily return for us which Revelation presents as meeting His bride for the wedding.

In Jewish betrothal they were joined in covenant before marriage, commemorated by eating at the table and drinking fruit of the vine, looking forward to a marriage consummation celebration to come. Our time is gone today, I may develop this a little more next week. There was still a timeframe before the covenant couple was united on their wedding day, consummating the covenant as "one flesh."

Luke 22:16 *I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."*¹⁷ *And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves;"¹⁸ for I say to you, **I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes.**"*

... ²⁹ *and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you* ³⁰ *that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom ...*

In other words, this scene in the gospels is not “the Last Supper” with Jesus (as DaVinci called it in his painting). There is another supper with Jesus to come for His disciples/followers, the *wedding supper of the Lamb* as it’s called in Revelation. This is what we’re about to commemorate and celebrate in communion. This table is only for those in a new covenant relationship with the Lord. For those of you who are not sure if that’s you, or not sure if you’re a disciple, you’re not living for the Lord, you have questions ... let the bread and cup pass today, and please talk with me afterwards. For us who are His body, let’s make sure we are right with the rest of His body, and let’s marvel in His covenant-keeping love to us.

¹ J. Robertson McQuilkin, *A Promise Kept* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998), p. 26-27, 20-23.

² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6pX1phlqug&feature=player_embedded

³ McQuilkin, "Living by Vows," *Christianity Today*, October 8, 1990, and "Muriel's Blessing," *Christianity Today*, Feb. 5, 1996.

⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/februaryweb-only/2-9-11.0.html?start=5> (2004 interview, includes links to 1990 and 1993 originals)

⁵ Peter O’Brien, *Ephesians*, p. 429.

⁶ Steve Camp, “Consider the Cost,” album same title (Sparrow Records, 1991).

⁷ Liddell-Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 972.

⁸ As cited by Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 773.

⁹ McQuilkin, *A Promise Kept*, 30-33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 61-63.

¹¹ See the Jewish scholar Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 72; David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament*, (Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1996), comments on 1 Co 11:5; Howard Vos, *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Manners & Customs: How the People of the Bible Really Lived* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), 449.

¹² <http://www.wildolive.co.uk/weddings.htm>

¹³ “Ketubah,” in *The Woman’s Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995).