

Will you promise to have great and intimate conversations with her, providing she offers sex several times a week? And will you allow her to spend time shopping with her friends, as long as she allows you to spend time with the guys during football season? Will you work hard to provide half your income, as long as she contributes equally to your finances? If difficulties arise which affect your happiness or the relationship is no longer fulfilling to you, will you calmly and respectfully depart? With this understanding, will you be true and loyal, and cherish her? Mackenzie, do you take Lucas to be your husband, your friend, your partner, and your love from this day forward – unless life gets too hard trying to make it work?

Do you solemnly vow to be his faithful partner in health, in good times, and in joy? Will you support his goals, honor and respect him, as long as he puts you first, cares for you, and lets you have a night out with the girls once a week? Do you understand his needs, and are thankful that your needs will be met as well, including intimate conversations and keeping your wardrobe current? If this relationship is no longer fulfilling and ceases to offer you security, it will be up to you to find a more suitable partner and leave with a good attitude. With this understanding, will you be true and loyal, and respect him? Anybody feel like something was wrong with that? I don't think any married couple who had the opportunity to stand and exchange vows would exchange vows that sounded like that.

But the reality of what we see and what's happening in the world around us is that what you've heard is about what most people's commitment looks like. And what you just heard was not an exchange of covenant; it was not an exchange of covenant vows. What you heard was essentially a contract: if you, then I. What many people have reduced marriage to be today is nothing more than some kind of a contractual obligation that you can take or leave that really speaks more to what it means to get out of it than what it means to stay in it. When we look at what the Bible says about marriage, the Bible describes something as so much more than a contract. It describes marriage as a covenant.

And today I want to talk to you about the difference between a contract and a covenant, and why I think that as a church, we need to take the opportunity and draw a clear distinction between what a civil marriage is, and the contract that one enters into before the state, and what a covenant marriage is, something that one enters into before God and their community of faith. I don't think that marriage is broken, but I think there's something out there that the culture has called marriage that no longer contains the essence of what God intended marriage to be, and I think it's time for the church to lift its prophetic voice and to tell the world, not just with its words but by her actions, "There's a better way." Will you help me thank this beautiful couple?

You see, here in America we've learned a lot about marriage from Hollywood. We've learned a lot about marriage from reading the front cover of magazines. We've learned a lot about marriage in the last 60 years from movies, and from celebrities. But I think that the time has come where we need to come back to what the Word of God has to say about marriage, and as a church, as the people of God, do what only you can do. And

that is have a prophetic voice in culture; a voice that speaks on behalf of what God says is truth. Here's why I think this is so important. It's not a surprise to anybody that when you look around and survey what's going on in the United States of America, that marriage is declining, and divorce is accelerating.

That's one issue, but here's the issue that has gotten my attention. It's the way in which young adults, the Millennials, high school students, junior high students, are beginning to vocalize their lack of trust that marriage holds any value at all anymore. Because this isn't just about your marriage – it's about what your children will grow up with the expectation of or the hope for because of what they see. Here's what the statistics tell us. The statistics tell us that if current trends continue, the Millennial generation – college students-ish – by the time they reach 40, only 69 percent of Millennial women will have ever been married, and only 65 percent of Millennial men will ever be married. Now, the reason that's a little bit startling is that when you look at how their mothers and fathers viewed marriage, you'll see it's changed significantly.

Gen Xers, their parents had 82 percent of women and 76.6 percent of men married by the time that they were 40, so you can see that 12 percent drop. When you go generations back, you'll see this trend, this consistent downward spiral of people's expectations that they'll ever be married. Perhaps part of the reason is because of what we're witnessing when it comes to divorce, and the statistics tell us that approximately 40 percent of first-time marriages will end in divorce. You've heard 50; it's probably 40, conservatively. But of those 40 percent, those that remarry, statistically, 60 percent of second marriages will fail, and 73 percent of third marriages will fail. That tells us that we're not learning. And when you look at the state of marriage in the United States, one could ask the question, "Is it time that we just abandoned the idea of marriage altogether?"

You know, when I read what the Word of God says, when I look at what the Bible says, I read things like this. In Hebrews 13:4, the Bible tells us that marriage should be *held in honor*. Another translation says *in high regard*; with the utmost respect. When you read what the Bible says, when you read the story of God throughout the Scripture, we find that marriage matters to God. It matters to His mission, and it matters for the good of the world. I don't know if you know this, but when you read the story of God in the Bible, the opening act is a wedding in the garden. The closing act is a wedding between Christ and the church. All throughout the Old Testament we read about God's relationship to the nation of Israel as a covenant marriage relationship.

And then Jesus comes onto the scene to show us how that broken relationship can be restored through His life, His sacrifice, His resurrection power. And what's the picture that's used? Well, the apostle Paul, in Ephesians 5:31, says this, recounting the Genesis wedding. He said *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*" This idea of marriage that God designed is not just at the beginning, it's not just at the end; it's not just in the Old Testament. The picture of marriage is central to understanding and seeing the gospel. Marriage matters to God. You see, I don't think that we, in any way, should abandon marriage.

But I do think that we need to call it what it is, and recognize that because of how marriage is being redefined by culture, that it is becoming increasingly divergent from what God intended it to be. Now, you may have heard somebody, you may have heard of this author before; his name is C.S. Lewis. I'm not the first one to advocate that there needs to be a distinction made between civil marriage – that which you enter into contractually with the state – and covenant marriage – that which you enter into through vows before God. This is what C.S. Lewis said. "There ought to be two distinct kinds of marriage: one governed by the state, with rules enforced on all citizens, and the other governed by the church, with rules enforced by her on her own members. The distinction ought to be quite sharp, so that a man knows which couples are married in a Christian sense, and which are not."

See, what C.S. Lewis understood is that in order for us to hold marriage in high regard, we need to understand that God's expectation and design for marriage is something that cannot be forced upon people who have no desire for Jesus to be the Lord of their life. And when the Bible tells us in 1 Corinthians that you can't judge non-Christians by Christian standards, C.S. Lewis cues in on that and says as the tides of culture continue to shift, we need to recognize that what you enter into contractually when Jesus isn't a part is just a different thing altogether than what you enter into when you stand before God and invite Jesus to be the Lord of your life and your relationship in your marriage. It's different. It's just different.

Where the difference is seen most poignantly is in the way that God's design for marriage is grounded in covenant; the way in which God's design for marriage is grounded in contract. Genesis 2:24 gives us some covenant language; helps us understand the difference between what a covenant is and what a contract is. This is what the Bible says. *Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall* – read these three words with me – *become one* –

*Response: Flesh.*

Good. See, that's covenant language. Contract says where two individuals bound by a contractual obligation, and when that contractual obligation is not fulfilled by one party, then the relationship is dissolved; that's what a contract is. But a covenant – and you can study this in the ancient Near East, and thousands of years in the history of the world – the idea of covenant goes so much beyond a contract. Because a covenant says that when we enter into covenant with one another, there ceases to exist you and me, and there is now only us. And a covenant says we are together until death, because I would no longer allow you to suffer than myself. When you lose, I lose; when you win, I win. From this point forward, a covenant says we're one.

The two shall become one. That's what a covenant is. And what God designed marriage to be, what He intended it to be, was not just a covenant between two people, but God designed covenant marriage to be a three-fold covenant between the two parties involved, and individually between them and God. Let me illustrate by bringing my wife with a beautiful haircut to the platform. I may have not noticed the haircut when I saw her

immediately following, and there may be some attempt to make up for that in my comments today.

*Fawn Cobler:* I love you.

I love you, too – and you're beautiful. Okay. Here's what God's schematics – this is how God designed covenant marriage to work, and watch the power of it. In Malachi 2:14, the prophet speaks, and he says, "Why is God upset?" He said it's because *the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your* – you see it – *marriage covenant*. But then in Proverbs 2:17, the Bible says critically of one who abandons a marriage *She has abandoned her husband and ignores the covenant that she made before God*. Here's the strength of a marriage covenant. The strength of a marriage covenant is that God designed marriage to be a covenant this way – one, here's one covenant.

But then there's also a covenant that I as the husband make with God, and that covenant is a covenant that says I am coveting with the Creator and Designer of marriage, Who has a design, a purpose, a plan for my life. Now as I enter into the role of a husband, I have a covenant responsibility to God to be who He has created me and called me to be. And that's a covenant that I make with Him – listen to me – independently of this covenant. Now, my wife will also extend her hand and make a covenant with God to play the role that God has intended her to play, and that covenant with God is independent of her covenant with me. And you think, "What difference does that make?" Well, here's the difference.

Number one, the Bible says in 1 Corinthians that *All the promises of God are yes and amen in Jesus*. That means that when you enter into a promise with God, a covenant with God, that Jesus is the security, is the one that validates and verifies the strength of the promise. So when I make a covenant before God with my wife, Jesus comes and wraps His hand around our hands. And when I make a covenant with God to be the husband that he has called me to be, Jesus comes with His strength and power, and wraps His hand around my hand, between God and I, and her as well. And what you see in the Biblical, God's design for marriage, with Jesus at the center, is that the strength of our vows are not just my integrity and her integrity.

But it's the way in which Jesus comes in the power of His Spirit to strengthen, to infuse life, to bring help, and to bring hope to that marriage relationship. And I'll tell you when that will become the most meaningful. It may not mean that much when your marriage is ideal, like the 40 minutes of the ceremony, when it's perfect. But here's how God wants to protect you, is that when you make a covenant with God, even if this covenant fails guess Whose hand is held tightly? And guess what happens when this, the love begins to waver – guess Whose love never wavers? And guess what happens when forgiveness is hard to come by in this part of the covenant? Guess where there is always forgiveness? When grace is hard to come by, where there's always grace?

And for some of you who are in that marriage relationship, and you're saying, "Well, this doesn't apply to me because my spouse has refused to lift their hand and take hold of God's purpose and God's plan," then loved ones, listen. This is God's plea to you. Reach out today and take the hand that He's extended to you, because it only takes one to invite the promise and the presence of God into your relationship. Make a covenant with God and invite Him to do what only He can do in your marriage. Did she do good? Do you love her haircut? Now, you may ask the question, "Why would a pastor even concern them?" That's what covenant is. A contract can't do that for you. A contract says, "When the terms of the contract are violated, then the contract is executed, and we're done with you."

Covenant says, "I'm never done with you;" and Jesus is the surety, the One that enforces and guarantees that covenant. Why would a pastor care what culture does to change civil marriage? Because obviously, civil marriage is handled very differently. Today, in the state of Washington, anybody with 200 bucks and the desire in most cases can end a marriage. Why should I care? Well, one of the reasons that I care as a pastor is the way in which pastors have been asked for years to relate to civil marriage. D.A. Carson, who is a graduate of Cambridge University, and now the President of the Gospel Coalition, who is an advocate for pastors to make a clear distinction between civil marriage and covenant marriage, he writes this.

He says, "Ministers of the gospel who perform marriages need to remember that when they do so, they are not performing a sacrament or making a marriage union more holy. They are functioning as officials of the state, licensed by them. They are discharging their duties as citizens of an earthly kingdom. In France, all of these Christian duties are separate from the legal marriage vows themselves. Here, they are integrated precisely because the minister is serving as both a minister of the gospel and a minister of the state." Why does this issue of distinguishing between civil and covenant marriage matter to me as a pastor? It matters because every time I've signed a marriage license I've been asked by the state to serve as its extension.

And the concern that I have has only grown in the last two or three years, as I've observed and done the research, and looked at how much marriage sanctioned by the state has changed in the last 60 years. I don't know if you know this. Some of these changes I think are good, some of them are bad, but the point is, it's radical change. Did you know that before 1969 – 1967, sorry – it was still illegal in many places in the United States for an interracial marriage to take place? Now, how many of you were born before 1967? Don't be ashamed – it's okay. In your lifetime, there were places in the United States when a black person wanted to marry a white person, it was against the law. Somebody tell me you have a problem with that, please. Now that changed, and that's a good change.

But here's another change – 1967. 1969, sorry – odd numbers, you know; it's a lot to keep track of. In 1969 was the first time that there was a Federal law that mandated no-fault divorce to be available to married couples. Before 1969, in many places if two people were legally married and they wanted to get out of that marriage, there had to be a

reason. Somebody had to be unfaithful, abusive, neglectful – they had to show cause, because they believed that otherwise, you ought to make it work. And most recently, most recently in the last several years in the United States, the very fundamental sense of what a marriage is between a man and a woman has been almost summarily redefined, not by the people, but by the courts.

Now, you may think some of those are really good, some of them are really bad. Here's the point: in the last 60 years, what the state calls marriage has changed dramatically, and my concern as a pastor is even though some of those changes I would embrace and endorse, those changes are not fueled by people standing on the Word of God. They're fueled by the courts and by culture. And while culture has every right to shape the ways in which we govern the land, there is still a higher truth and a higher calling to the truth of the Scripture that when those two things are not in conflict, then we live as citizens of two worlds; citizens of the world, and citizens of the kingdom. But when those two conflict, we must stand as citizens of the kingdom of God.

I believe that civil and covenant marriage have become so confused that it's the church that needs to speak loudly and clearly that there's two different things that we're talking about here. I want to say that one of the reasons this is a passion for me, it's not because I hate civil marriage and we're going to have a marriage license burning party. That's not the point, church. The point is that I think that what God designed for marriage is so good, and so holy, and so needed in the world in which we live, and the church is the only voice that can speak prophetically into the culture, that the church needs to rise. Not to condemn, but with grace and truth to proclaim to our world, to our children that there's a better way.

I've had too many people sit in my office, broken-hearted because they stood somewhere before a judge or a pastor, and they exchanged vows, and they thought that because we're married, we have a license and everything, that ought to hold us together. And they came to that place where it wasn't enough – it didn't work. There was something about that contract that couldn't shape the human heart. And I hear it – the disappointment, the confusion – over and over again. And again, I say, "Who can speak to the heart?" It's not the state. It's not a contract. The only One that can speak to the heart is the God who created the heart, and that's what you and I stand on behalf of, to prophetically say, "God is for you, not against you, but unless you trust Him, then you stand on your own, not under His covering and blessing."

That's why I care, because I care about people. So in light of that, here's my commitment to you. Number one, I will always hold the truth of Scripture above the trends of culture. That's a non-negotiable. Now, that does not mean that we run from culture; in fact, the only way that the gospel can impact people's lives is if Christians – you and me and many others – live within the culture, and live out the gospel among culture. We don't run from culture. We don't need people to run away from the court systems. We need more people that love Jesus, and love the truth of His Word, to be judges, and to be in the system. We don't need people to run away from the school system that's teaching things that are contrary to the Word of God.

We need more people to enter into those arenas of society, and then use their prophetic voice to make a difference for the good of mankind and the world. We don't need to run away from culture. But the church is the only place that can have a prophetic voice, and I think that marriage is important enough, and it's changing rapidly enough, and there are enough people who have been hurt, and disappointed, and disillusioned, and enough young people that don't get it, and they're confused about what marriage is, and enough people entering into marriage unprepared for what's ahead of them, that it's your job, it's my job, it's the job of the church to stand up and say, "God is for you, God is for your flourishing, and God has given you the prescription to live a life to its fullest.

"But this is it, and there is no alternative."

*Response: Amen [applause].*

So as we move forward at Living Water, there are going to be some things that look differently in the future. In the fall of – is there a bottle of water down there? Can I have a bottle of water? Thank you. You're beautiful. I love your haircut. Coming in the fall of 2015 – so the end of the summer – Living Water is going to be introducing a handful of additional opportunities that have to do with helping people in different seasons of marriage. There'll be more clear opportunities for people who are wanting to be prepared for marriage. There'll be more opportunities for people that are struggling in their marriage. I hope you don't hear me saying that Living Water will only be a place for perfect marriages, because if that were the case, we'd probably have to be the first couple to leave.

No, that's not the point. But that Living Water could be a place where we could be honest and authentic about the ways in which we're sinful, we've failed, we've made mistakes. But because we recognize that Jesus is the solution to that, that we don't hide from our mistakes and our shortcomings, but we bring them to the light of the truth, and we repent and believe what God says, and then we expect Him to act, to move on our behalf. Can we be a place where people can come in messed up and dirty and not feel like they have to get cleaned up before they come to church? But can we be a place where people say, "Man, if you're struggling, don't wait to go to church. Get to church, because there's a bunch of messed-up people there, too.

"And you'll feel right at home, but they're moving in the right direction" – how about that? We don't claim to have it all figured out; we just claim to know Who and what to look to for the answers and the solutions in life, and that's to look to Jesus and the gospel. And when we find ourselves pursuing other things, we repent and believe the truth, and the promise of God is that He will fulfill His Word every time. That's what I want – not to condemn the culture, but to speak with grace and truth to the culture, and say, "God is for you, and He has provided the antidote to your dilemma." And we're going to provide more opportunities to help good marriages get great, and we're going to provide more opportunities for you, if you're on the other side of a marriage that has failed, to know that you have a family.

And that if, by God's grace, you have the opportunity to enter into marriage number two, you will defy the statistics, because you learned, and you submitted to Jesus, and your future in Jesus is never dictated by your past. That's good news. The second thing that's going to be different at Living Water is that beginning in the fall of 2015 Living Water pastors will no longer involve themselves as agents of the state and sign marriage licenses. So beginning the fall of 2015, Living Water pastors will no longer act as extensions of the state and sign marriage licenses. Now, when I say that, it may raise some questions, and I want to clarify a couple of things. Number one, if somebody wants to get married at Living Water, what do I do?

And very simply, in the fall it will be obvious; very simply, you pick up the phone and you call and you say, "Hey, this is what I'm hoping for." And there will be a process that involves people that care for you to help you navigate that process, 'cause we are for marriage. We're not against marriage, we're for marriage. You may ask the question, "Are you against people getting marriage licenses, or having marriage licenses?" I want you to please read my lips: I'm not against marriage licenses. In fact, in our culture, marriage licenses still play an important part in a marriage. But the value of a marriage license to somebody who embraces God's design for marriage is that a marriage license does this.

It provides safety and security in relationship to the governing laws of the State of Washington, or whatever state you're in, in the event that somebody dies and there are financial issues, inheritance issues, children in the mix, or health insurance benefits and things like that. Because we are still citizens of the world, it's still important that that has a part of your marriage. And if you go through the marriage preparation at Living Water, you'll be required to go to the court and get a marriage license signed by a judge before the covenant ceremony will be performed. And you may think, "That just sounds crazy." Well, maybe; but this is how it's been done in France and many places in Europe for a long time.

And it's how it's been done in Mexico and places in South America and other parts of the world for a long time as well. It's new and different here in the United States, but it's not new in the world. And the point is not to diminish what civil marriage is; it's to distinguish that it's a very different thing than what covenant marriage is. Now, what if you have never made a covenant, but you're civilly married to somebody? What if you got married at the courthouse before you were a Christian, and now you're walking with Jesus, and you think, "Well, my pastor just said that I don't have a covenant marriage with the person that I'm legally married to?" Here's the answer.

If you've never exchanged vows and made a covenant before God with the person that you're legally married to, then the simple answer is you haven't made a covenant and exchanged vows with the person that you're legally married to. But let me tell you, last year during the Month for Marriage, at the end of Month for Marriage in 2014, we provided an opportunity for people to renew their vows, and so we rented the Capitol Building, and had about 60 or 70 couples that came to the Capitol Rotunda who had written vows to one another and understood this, and then exchanged vows. It was



powerful. But the unexpected consequence of that for me were the number of people that came up to me and said, "We got married legally before we were Christians.

"We had no idea about covenant, and no idea that God cared about a marriage." And they said, "But since then we've become Christians, and we just haven't known where marriage fits in what we are and who we are." And they said, "For the first time, somebody recognized that and gave us the opportunity to express the covenant conviction that we have." And the number of people with tears in their eyes that said, "You gave us that opportunity to recognize that Jesus is in the center of our relationship. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." And so if you find yourself in that situation, you're not an outsider. We will provide those opportunities for you as well.

And it's not to condemn you; it's to offer you a gift from God's Word, and say, "God wants you to open it to bless you, not to condemn you." And loved ones, please hear me: God is far more concerned with what you do when you know the truth than what you did when you were ignorant of the truth. That's good news, isn't it? And if that's your situation, and you feel a sense of urgency, then you don't have to wait; come talk to a pastor today, because we want to walk with you. Now, you may also ask, "Is this a response to same-sex marriage?" And the answer is no. This is a response to the marriage culture in America over the last 60 years. And is same-sex marriage a part of the way in which culture is redefining something that God has a clear definition for?

Absolutely; it's part of it, but it's not the motivating reason. The motivating reason is that we are for what God calls marriage to be; that's it. And we want to as the church hold that in high regard. And if you were to say to me, "Well, what about all the people that have good marriages, but they're not Christians?" I mean you know some people that have good marriages that aren't Christians. What about those people? Well, it's a simple answer, because in the same way that what makes somebody a Christian is not being a good person, but it's that Jesus is the Lord of their life, you can have a good marriage, but not have a marriage that God is going to inhabit and bless with the promises of God. You can have a good marriage that isn't a covenant marriage, but it's not a covenant marriage.

And as the church, we want to hold this in high regard. Listen, I want people who aren't Christians to have good marriages, and I'd rather they have a good marriage than a bad marriage – amen? But that is in a different category than what you can do when God is in the center, when Jesus is the Lord of your life, and that is a truth that we will not and cannot compromise. Now finally, and Ryan, if you're back there, you can come to the platform. Am I going to criticize pastors who sign marriage licenses? What I'm going to do is provide a list of the names of every pastor that performs, that signs a marriage license, and then when you leave the church, you can spit on it and throw darts at it. Of course not, because I'm not against pastors signing marriage licenses.

I'm for pastors taking the responsibility to hold marriage in high regard, and I want to partner with – and the churches in this community have asked for help to navigate this, because everyone is trying to figure out, "How do we address this brokenness that we are all experiencing?" And some pastors will join me, and others won't. But I'll tell you, as I

have the privilege to lead the network of pastors in Thurston County, there is a united desire to hold marriage in high regard. We may differ on whether or not we sign marriage licenses, but that is secondary to the point that there is a passionate pursuit to help marriages thrive, and I'm proud to be a part of that.

So what's the point? The point is God is for you, and when you reach up and take His hand, and Jesus, Jesus wraps His hand around yours, and that becomes the strength that you have. If you're in a one-sided marriage, it feels like, if you'll stand in covenant with God today, it's no longer one-sided, because now you have the Creator and Sustainer of the universe working on your behalf. If you're on the other side of a failed marriage, there's no condemnation. But if any of us need to address decisions and choices we've made that we have yet to repent of, man, we serve a God that says when you repent and believe He doesn't keep you at a distance. He runs and embraces you. In the 19th chapter of Revelation, you see the picture of what happens, what's going to happen, the Bible says, when Jesus meets the church.

It's a beautiful picture. It says *"Let us rejoice and exult and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His Bride has made herself ready. It was granted her to clothe herself in fine and pure linen, and the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." And the angel said to me, "Write this: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' For this is the truth."* See, one of the reasons that marriage matters to God is there's something that God wants you to know, whether you're married or single or widowed or divorced. God wants every one of you to know this. That if you've ever had the privilege of being at a wedding, in many cases, you know what I'm about to say.

One of my favorite parts of the wedding is when I'm standing next to the groom and the bride begins to come down the aisle, because there's a look of anticipation on a groom's face. And you know in that moment there is nothing else in the world that matters except being united with the one he loves. It's profound. And what Jesus would want every one of you to experience is that that picture of a groom longing to be united with his bride is the very picture of how much Jesus wants you to embrace His fullness and His life, His offer of forgiveness. And it's one thing when a bride and a groom exchange vows and say, "Till death do us part," and you see the miracle take place, but listen, Jesus has made a vow to you, and even death can't break it apart; He proved it.

And there's nobody else on the planet earth that's been there and done that, and extends the offer to you today, to say, "Come and let Me love you. Let Me heal your broken heart. Let Me calm your fears, and let Me lift you up as an example for the world to see of My love, My goodness." Would you let Him do that for you? Because for every one of you today, Jesus is saying, "Will you marry Me?" Jesus is saying, "Will you marry Me? Will you marry Me? And you...and you...and will you trust your life to the One who will never leave you or forsake you?" Would you bow your heads?