

Getting married brings with it a lot of important decisions. “For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health,” are all a good starting point. They're a necessary foundation. But they are not a detailed description of what married life is like.

Marriage isn't just about big decisions. It's about little decisions too. About the everyday tasks that you will complete together as husband and wife. About the daily decisions that need to be made and the division of responsibilities in running the household. Who pays the bills? Who stays home with the children? Who does the laundry? On and on the list goes.

And it's a well-known facet of marriage counseling that eventually married couples almost always begin to fall into roles. One parent becomes the disciplinarian. They make all the decisions that deal with setting rules and punishing bad behavior. One parent becomes the nurturer. They're the one who springs into action when there's a scraped knee or a runny nose. One spouse handles all the finances. One spouse becomes the vacation planner. One spouse does all the cooking.

Now this is usually helpful... as long as everybody likes and appreciates their roles. But a very common cause of marital unhappiness – and even divorce – can occur when one spouse doesn't enjoy the role they've been handed. The disciplinarian doesn't want to always be the bad guy. The financial planner doesn't always want to be stuck filing taxes. You see the problem?

And when that happens, things start to fall apart. Because they feel trapped in a role they do not want. They feel suffocated by a set of duties they no longer want to have and decisions they no longer want to make. And the only way out, short of divorce, is for the couple to make a very conscious effort to redefine their roles. Redefine their marriage. And create something new from the old.

I bring all this up because it relates directly to our Old Testament lesson for today. In Jeremiah 31, God refers to his relationship with Israel as a marriage. “*I was a husband to them,*” He says. This isn't the first time God has described their relationship as a marriage, nor will it be the last. The marriage of God and His people is one of the most common images in all of Scripture. And in this marriage, they have each taken a vow. They have made a covenant.

And just like marriage vows can be boiled down to the words, “For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health,” and everyone know what I'm talking about, the covenant of the Israelites can be summarized in a simple expression as well: “*I will be their God, and they will be my people.*” Simple. Elegant.

It's a statement that is used over and over again throughout scripture. Beginning all the way back with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Reaffirmed time after time as God led his people out of Egypt and into the promised land. An unshakable covenant throughout the kingdoms of His people. I will be their God and they will be my people. God's way of saying, “For better or for worse,” to their marriage.

But in our Old Testament lesson for today, God throws the Israelites a curveball: “*The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and the people Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant.*” And I can just imagine their response.

“A new covenant? But, God... the old covenant has been around for a long, long time.” I mean, we're talking over a thousand years by the time of Jeremiah. I will be their God and they will be my people. It's been hammered into them time and time again. And God is just throwing it away?

Well, not exactly. Because at first glance, the new covenant is just like the old one. “*I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.*” This is all familiar. It's almost a direct quote out of the book of Exodus, in fact. There's nothing new here.

And yet, there is. Because God isn't trying to divorce Israel. He's trying to redefine their marriage. Redefine their covenant.

You see, for the last thousand years of this covenant, Israel has understood how to be God's people through the sacrificial system. Being God's people meant being forgiven. And being forgiven meant offering an atonement for your sin. And offering an atonement meant making a sacrifice at the temple. And so being God's people was making sacrifices. Period.

And they were good at that. Israel was always good at the sacrificial system. That was their role in this marriage. And they were happy with it.

And yet, they have still broken the covenant. Because in God's eyes, being His people was about far more than sacrifices. When God looks back at Exodus and examines their covenant, he doesn't see the sacrificial system. He doesn't even mention it.

No, all he sees is having His law in your mind and on your heart. About serving no other gods before him and about living a perfect life of humility to your neighbor. Jesus spells it out in our Gospel lesson, *"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."*

And Israel was never very good at that. Humanity was never very good at that. We are never very good at that.

Like Israel, we so desperately want to boil God's Law down to one simple action. Make a sacrifice at the temple. Show up to church on Sunday. Give a tithe. Help your neighbors. Don't drink. Don't look at porn. Don't swear. Don't gossip. Don't... whatever.

Look around Christian literature and you'll find author after author who reduces a relationship with God down to one seemingly simple act. Look at your own lives and you'll probably find yourself setting one pious act up on a pedestal and saying, "That's the most important one. If I just do that, everything else with God will be good."

And yes, maybe you should be doing that. Maybe these are good and pious acts you are doing. Maybe there is a sin in your life that's more problematic than the others. The problem with saying that, though, is that, like Israel, we're working under the old covenant. We're working with the wrong definition of what it means to be God's people.

And God spells it out for us: you broke that covenant. You will always break that covenant. Because a marriage with God is a lot more than one pious act. It's about more than keeping one Law. It's about have all of God's Law, every word of it, in your mind and on your heart. Every minute of every hour of the day. It's about ceasing to be people of the world and being God's people entirely.

And so it seems like God is setting us up for more Law. If just making sacrifices wasn't enough, then what else must we do for this new covenant? This new relationship? Well, that's the funny part. Because the new covenant isn't about doing more. It's about doing less, in fact.

*"No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."* Wait a second. I thought to be great, you had to be a servant. I thought God's whole point was knowing the Lord by trying harder to keep his law. I thought the whole point was to do more. And yet, this is the new covenant in a nutshell: *"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

God redefined our relationship with Him by taking on the entire burden of that relationship. We thought that in order to be great we had to become a servant, but the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.

We thought that in order to know God's Law we had to keep it better, but the Son learned obedience by what he suffered on our behalf. We thought that in order to keep the covenant, we had to pour out for God our blood, sweat, and tears, but Christ said, "Take and drink. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins."

In Christ's blood shed on the cross, God forgave our wickedness and remembered our sins no more. In Christ's blood poured out on this very altar, God forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more. Because this is the blood of the new covenant. A covenant not based on one animal's sacrifice for one person's sin, but a covenant based on one person's sacrifice for all of humanity's sins.

God didn't just tell us about the new covenant or show us the new covenant. He is the new covenant. It is His blood that seals it. So that He is our God and we are His people. And that relationship will never change.

For many married couples, it takes intense counseling and communication to redefine their marriage. For God and His people it took a death and resurrection to redefine our covenant. But the effect is the same. A new relationship. A new love. It doesn't always make sense to us. But it's what God has always wanted. And, in the end, it's what we really wanted as well. Amen.