

Text: Exod. 31:12-17, 35:1-3

Title: The sign of Sinai's covenant

Time: 12/10/2023 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Our family has been blessed with a future daughter-in-law. My son Kent and his finance Caroline are engaged to be married after Christmas. As a sign of their intention to marry, Kent gave to Caroline and Caroline wears on her hand an engagement ring. The ring is precious to our family, because it was the ring my dad gave my mom when they were engaged. The ring signifies not only the commitment of the love of the engaged couple, but also my dad's prayer that Kent and Caroline have the same blessed relationship together that he and my mom had for over 50 years.

Soon a new set of rings will enter the picture, the wedding rings. They too are signs, but they are a more significant sign than even the engagement ring. The wedding rings are signs of a covenant of love and matrimony. Interestingly, the word *matrimony* comes from the Latin word for *mother* (*mater*). When we call marriage *matrimony*, we are saying that marriage is an arrangement that provides for the successful mothering of children. That success requires faithfulness to the covenant of love between a husband and his wife, and the sign of that ongoing love-commitment is the wedding ring.

God's relationship to His people is very much like holy matrimony. It is a covenant of love, which makes the Lord our God and us His people. Jesus loves His church the way every husband should love their wives (Eph. 5:25), and the Lord is the help of His people the way every wife should be the helper of her husband (Ps. 121:1-2). The Lord desires that His church be a godly mother to spiritual children as He works to bring many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10). In addition, this covenant between God and His people has been represented by signs that function very much like the wedding ring.

Wearing a wedding ring does not make you married; the covenant does. I remember the day I lost my wedding ring on top of the modular roof. It no longer fit on the finger it was designed for, so my practice was to wear it on a smaller finger, where it was a bit loose, but where it did not inhibit blood flow. After cleaning out the gutters of the modular, putting the muck into the wheel barrow, and dumping it in the woods, I noticed that my ring was no longer on my hand.

The good news was that I was still married. The bad news was that I knew how important that sign of my marriage was to me, and worse yet to my wife, so I knew I had some digging to do in the woods. Sure enough, I found in the gutter muck the sign of my covenant of marriage with Maureen. I washed it off and continued to wear it until I lost it again somewhere else, I believe at a basketball game in Hillsboro.

One difference between the sign of a covenant and the covenant it represents is that the sign is easily replaced. Unable to recover my wedding ring the second time, my wife and I went to the store and purchased another one. This one is better than my original wedding ring because it fits on the right finger, and it does not fall off when I am cleaning gutters or coaching basketball.

One of the signs God used specifically with Israel to represent His covenant of love with them, that He was their God and they were His people, was the Sabbath Day, the practice of setting apart Saturday for rest from the normal business of the week. We see the Sabbath Day first on the pages of Exodus and in the history of Israel, when God told His people not to gather manna on Saturday in Exodus 16. They were instead to gather a double portion on Friday to cover Saturday.

Then we saw that the Sabbath Day became the fourth of the Ten Commandments of chapter 20. We said that it is unique among the Ten, because it is the one commandment no

Gentile nation was ever condemned for violating. That is because it was a commandment based, not in the ethical responsibilities of all mankind, but rather in the unique covenantal love relationship that God had with the nation of Israel. It was only they whom the Lord had redeemed from Egypt. Only they were expected to wear this wedding ring. Similarly today, the Lord does not expect everyone to be a member of a local church, only those who are baptized believers.

In the passages we read this morning, the Lord reemphasizes the Sabbath Day law, likely because He wanted Israel to prioritize it over the work on the tabernacle that He is here commanding Israel to perform. At times, husbands have to take off their ring for certain kinds of work. But here, the Lord is emphatic that He does not want Israel to take off their ring, to neglect rest on Saturday while they work on the tabernacle.

Today, the Lord neither asks Christians to build the tabernacle, nor to rest on Saturday. These were special arrangements of His Sinaitic covenant with Israel as a nation. God is not using the nation of Israel to mother His children in the world today. Instead, His people are organized into local churches in our dispensation so that each local church can be a loved mother who cares for new children in the family of God.

And as we operate under a similar but different covenant of love, which the Lord has designed for our day, it is important that we recognize, as Israel needed to, that the Lord has given us signs of this relationship that we enjoy with Him, which are just as important to our lives and ministry as the Sabbath Day was to the lives and ministry of Israelites. The Lord wants us to keep our rings on. They include local church membership and the local church ordinances. Being baptized, partaking of the Lord's Table, and submitting to the authority of the local church are all signs the Lord asks us to practice so the world around us can know beyond any doubt that He is our God and we are His people.

From our passage I would like us to see four parallels between God's sign for Israel and those He has designed for us today.

I. The sign reminded Israel to whom they belonged (vv. 12-13).

Illustration: Brother Mark can call his wayward cows back to their stable with a chant or song.

Application: The prophet Isaiah may have had some cattle at home, or at least he knew of someone who did, because he mentions the way cows will respond to the voice of their farmer at the very beginning of his prophecy: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward" (Isa. 1:2-4).

Clearly, something had gone horribly wrong in Israel. In Moses's day, God's people knew Him. In Isaiah's day, God's people had forgotten who He is. What happened? Our passage gives us a clue – they had taken off their ring. They had failed to keep their Sabbaths. We suspect this because the Lord says that He commanded the Sabbath rest precisely to prevent this from happening (v. 13).

Isaiah confirms our suspicion: "If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words. Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee

with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (Isa. 58:13-14).

Today, church membership, baptism, and the Lord's Table all remind us to whom we belong. It is He who has set us apart for this work of His. He designed these signs of His love for us and ours for Him. And they test whether we shall do them or "do our own ways," "find our own pleasure," and "speak our own words" instead. Imagine what the world would be like if every believer faithfully wore his wedding rings. Isaiah imagined that world: "I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." The sign of the Sabbath Day reminded Israel to whom they belonged, and our signs today will do the same for us.

II. The sign reminded Israel what might threaten their love for God (vv. 14-15; 35:1-3).

Illustration: As you know, Chic-Fil-A restaurants are closed on Sundays. I read this past week that the company forfeits close to a billion dollars a year in revenue with that approach.

Application: The Sabbath-rest command asked every Israelite to make the same kind of sacrifice. One seventh of everyone's earning potential had to be forfeited if this command were to be obeyed. Very simply, our passage calls the threat to Sabbath rest *work* or *business*. In other words, what threatened Israel's Sabbath rest was all the work Israelites would rather get done on a Saturday to earn money and obtain possessions.

In the book of Titus, Paul lists many threats to the work of the local churches Titus ministered to. He called these last days *perilous times*. Among other vices, he said that men would be lovers of self, lovers of money, and lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God. Faithfulness to local church ministry is the choice of loving God more. Unfaithfulness is the choice of

loving self, money, and/or pleasure more. Just like the work of the Israelites threatened their Sabbath, so the love of self, money, and pleasure threaten our commitment to wear the signs of the covenant of love that we have with the Lord.

III. The sign reminded Israel that others were to come after them (vv. 16-17).

Illustration: I am reading a book called *The Death of the Grown Up* by Diana West. The subtitle of the book is *How America's Arrested Development is Bringing Down Western Civilization*. She chronicles in her first chapter the rise of the dominance of the youth market in the 1950s after World War II. She notes that in 1952 six million "kiddie players" were sold enabling young people to listen to their own records in the privacy of their rooms instead of on the family sound system. Western Electric came out with Princess extension phones about that time, so kids could talk to their peers in private without using the common home phone. Magazines like *Seventeen*, *Dig*, *Teen*, *Teen World*, *16 Magazine*, *Modern Teen*, *Teen Times*, and *Confidential Teen Romances* began to push products for the youth market, like 45 rpm records, hairspray, portable record players, transistor radios, and the afore mentioned Princess phones.

The author quotes from the autobiography of Rosemary Clooney, a singing star of the previous generation, who described this cultural shift in the 1950s this way: "When I was a kid, we listened to grown-up music and bought grown-up records, the only records there were. But unlike my generation or those before me, these kids had their own money to spend. That meant that they had their own market, for the first time in popular music." Then after pointing out that in 1965 the mayor of Cleveland, OH banned rock music from his city after a riotous Beatles concert, and also that in the 1990s Cleveland won the bid to construct the \$91MM Rock-N-Roll Hall of Fame, West concludes that something has changed for the

worse in our culture. She believes that grown-ups are no longer in charge because they simply no longer exist.

Application: There is a phrase repeated throughout the Scripture and emphasized in our passage, which calls us to run counter this deteriorating culture of ours. It is the phrase *throughout your generations* (vv. 13, 16). As spiritual grown-ups, these Israelites were to pass their sign of the covenant to the next generation unchanged. It would teach them that God made the universe in six days, and then on the seventh day took some time for His soul as he blessed and sanctified it. The author of Hebrews saw the gospel here (Heb. 4:9-10).

Their sign reminded them that others were to come after them, who needed to know this Creator. There were to be no Sabbath rests for the young market that were different and separate from the Sabbath rests of the old. To the degree we have churches for the young market today, which are separate from the churches for the old, we have succumbed to a cultural trend that has denied its Creator and is bringing down western civilization and our churches along with it. God's covenantal signs remind us to pass the faith along unchanged.

IV. The sign reminded Israel that God must be feared (vv. 14-15, "put to death"; 1 Cor. 11:30).

Application: At first blush, we New Testament believers find the civil penalties outlined in this passage and others somewhat harsh. Old Testament believers did too, and perhaps this is one reason why we only read of one instance in which this sentence was ever carried out (Num. 15:32-36). Instead, what we read about in the Old Testament is that Israel did not take the Sabbath seriously, nor this penalty, and so their nation was lost.

And yet, last week as we celebrated the Lord's Table as New Testament believers, we read Paul's warning about some who

were weak and sickly at the local church there, and others who had died because of their disrespect for the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:30). The Table is a sign that reminds us every month that our God must be feared and revered in worship (Heb. 12:28-29). We are not a civil entity as a local church, and it is not our calling to execute lawbreakers like Israel's, but we still serve the same God who will chasten those whom He loves.

Conclusion: I believe my wife would be upset if I no longer wanted to wear my wedding ring. The reason she would be upset is that she loves me the way she does. I want her to wear the ring I gave her too.

Such is the jealous covenantal love of the Lord for His people, for you and for me who profess to belong to Him. He wants us to wear our rings, to make the signs of His love for us in our age a priority in our lives. He wants our relationship with Him to be secure and fruitful. Because we love Him in return, let's faithfully wear our rings for Him.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching