Our Covenant with the Lord

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

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Children's Talk: Agreements

Does anyone know what an agreement is? An agreement is when someone asks you to do something, and you say, or agree, that you will do it. When your mom says, "clean up your toys," and you say, "ok," you have made an agreement. If your teacher says, "no more talking" and you say "yes Mrs X", you have made an agreement. If your friend says she will tell you her secret if you won't tell anyone, and you say, "of course I won't!" you have made an agreement. What are some other agreements that people make?

But not all agreements are the same. There are lots of different ways of saying you agree to do something. If your mom says, "Clean up your toys," you can decide how strong your agreement is:

- Sure
- Ok
- Yes
- Yes absolutely!
- Yes, I promise!
- Yes, I pinkie promise absolutely!

Now if you agree by saying sure, and then decide, you know what, I'm not actually going to do what I said I would, that doesn't seem that bad. But if you say, "Yes, I pinkie promise absolutely!" that feels a lot worse, right?

So sometimes we even use this as an excuse. When we agree to do something, like clean up our toys, and then decide not to, we can defend ourselves by saying, "well, I didn't *promise* I would."

But that's not really how the Lord wants us to think of agreements. He doesn't want us to think that some agreements we can just forget about and ignore because we feel like it. He wants us to treat agreements as if they matter, even the little ones.

Back in the old days, people would make promises with an oath: they would say, "I promise, by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, and my own head that I will do what I said I would do!" That was basically their way of pinkie promising.

> Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your "Yes' be "Yes,' and your "No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

So Jesus was teaching them that instead of making big, grand promises, and thinking that they could break all the other promises, they needed to start just saying yes, and meaning it, or no, and meaning it.

When your mom asks you to clean up, and you say sure, that doesn't mean you can decide not to do it just because you didn't *promise* to do it. The say is true of saying "yes, Mrs. X" to your teacher or "of course I won't tell" to your friend. Whether you say, "sure," or, "Yes, I pinkie promise absolutely!" both agreements are just as important as each other. So the next time you agree to do something, think carefully about whether you actually mean to do it. And if you do, simply say "yes!" and then do it; or if you don't really mean to do it, just say, "no" and don't do it. But either way, when you make an agreement, make sure to do everything you can to keep it. Then people will trust what you say, and your agreements will be strong.

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Every word or concept in Scripture has a deeper spiritual meaning. This spiritual meaning is what ties the Word together from beginning to end. By looking at individual concepts as they appear throughout the Word we can begin to glimpse connections and strands of meaning running through what on the surface appear to be disparate and even contradictory stories. Today we are going to look at the idea of the Covenant, specifically the Covenant that exists between God and mankind. Along the way we will explore how we can better uphold our side of the Covenant and gain appreciation for how the Lord upholds His side.

Defining a Covenant

Before we jump in though I want to define “covenant.” Through the years this word has become a technical term for the pact that God made with the people of Israel. But in the original language the word for covenant simply means “agreement.” It could range in scope from a pact between two individuals, to an alliance between nations, all the way up to God’s relationship with humanity. What agreements do you have? Agreements with other people, yourself, or God?

As with any agreement, there are levels of meaning or significance, from the mundane to the profound. I thought I would use one of the more common agreements, or covenants, that we still encounter today. I have here a marriage certificate. This is the official recognition from the government that two individuals have entered into a marriage covenant. How that covenant is held can vary greatly between couples, or even vary greatly within one couple, depending on the context. I’ll go to two extremes, illustrated by two more documents. Here is a prenup, or ante nuptial, agreement. I’ll read a little bit of it and you tell me if you think this adequately

sums up the agreements that exist between a husband and wife. Now prenups aren't bad, they can be really useful, but they are not the whole picture. Now here is another document, very different in nature from the previous one. At the top it reads, "her vows." I'll read a few lines. I think we can all agree for all that the marriage certificate and prenup do represent some aspect of the agreements that exist between a husband and wife, these vows are a much truer, deeper, and more meaningful form of that agreement. If the main thing holding a marriage together is the legal contract, that is an extremely challenging and painful thing to experience. When a couple's focus is able to be on their heartfelt promises to each other, freely given and received, that is much closer to what most people are hoping for or working towards in marriage.

1. **The Lord's Promise**

Let's turn now to the covenant as described in the Word. Like in a marriage, we can easily end up viewing God's covenant with us as a mere legal contract. Yet as we go through the different ways the Word presents the idea of this covenant we will start to see that ideally, we reach a stage at which we see our relationship with God not as a mere contract, but as a heartfelt promise, freely and joyfully entered into on our part.

As with any agreement, there need to be two parties to it. In our case, they are the Lord and us. Both sides have something to offer the other. But interestingly, for the first covenant that is mentioned by name in the Word, part of that is missing. This is the covenant that the Lord made with Noah, his descendants, and all living things on the Earth after the flood had subsided:

> Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: "And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the

> earth. Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." (Genesis 9:8-11)

This is a powerful statement from the Lord, especially considering that in the story He had only recently wiped out most of the life on Earth. I mentioned though that something was missing from this covenant, or agreement. What's missing? A condition on the part of mankind. God did not promise, "*if you obey me*, I will never destroy life again." He flat out promised that it would never happen, regardless of the behaviour that people might engage in.

From this unusual agreement we learn just how committed the Lord is to keeping His covenant with us. As we will see, later covenants have clauses that people can keep or break; but at a fundamental level the Lord's side of the covenant is enduring and unshaken, regardless of how much we sin. You could reject the Lord at every turn; break every commandment, violate every rule; despise Him and treat your neighbour with cruelty; and so on and so forth; and still the Lord would not fail to uphold His promise of love and preservation. He would still seek to bless you, to forgive you, and work to lead you to eternal happiness in heaven. The Lord's side of the agreements is more of a promise and a certainty; it is us who can freely choose to uphold (or not) our end.

2. Our Side of the Deal

That's not to say that the agreement holds no matter what: we do have our part to play. We see this particularly in the covenant that was sealed at Mt. Sinai, when Jehovah gave the many laws and regulations that the Children of Israel were to follow. Their success was entirely contingent on how well they kept their side of the agreement: blessings if it was followed, curses if it was broken. They were told,

> Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of Jehovah your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today,

> that Jehovah your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of Jehovah your God.
> But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of Jehovah your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you. (Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 15)

The blessings and curses then listed consist almost entirely of material wealth and safety, or material poverty and disaster.

On the one hand, it is clear that these exact blessings and/or curses no longer apply to us: those who keep the Covenant outlined in the Ten Commandments do not become fabulously wealthy, nor are those who disobey struck down with calamity. Even so we can still draw an important lesson from this conceptualisation of covenant. We do indeed suffer when we fail to keep the Lord's commandments. Not that He punishes us or that we fail in a material sense; but evil carries its own reward. The further we stray from the Lord's covenant with us, the less able He is to bless us with spiritual joy and happiness. The more we return to Him and keep His commandments, the better we can receive the spiritual joy and happiness that He was trying to grant us all along. Even if evil is not always punished, it always has a consequence; in the same vein, even if good is not always rewarded, there is always a blessing in doing it. The Lord's promises to bless those who keep His commandments is an agreement that He will never break.

3. A Loving Relationship

But there is something more to our agreement with the Lord than just a contractual exchange of obedience and blessing, just as a marriage is not about the terms and conditions of the contract, it's about a relationship. If we look for loopholes and technicalities in the Word that let us get away with as much as possible while suffering the fewest consequences, then we have not really fulfilled the spirit of the

Lord's law. The commandments are a crucial underpinning of that relationship; but the goal is to so willingly and freely follow them that we stop experiencing them as something we are forced to follow; the goal is to have them written on our hearts.

> This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:33)

This New Covenant is the one that Jesus came to establish with us. It's not just a new set of rules to blindly follow, but an opportunity for a deeper kind of relationship. Following the rules is a good start. But when we fully realize their purpose is a loving relationship, or covenant, they are no longer a chore but the simple acts of true friendship:

> No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. (John 15:15)

The Lord enables us to enter into a relationship with Him that is not forced, but that is free and joyful. He wants to have a relationship that is less like the terms and conditions of a legal contract and more like the personal vows promised in marriage. This is the ultimate goal of all spiritual covenants or agreements. The Teachings of the New Church explain it this way:

> The purpose of any covenant is conjunction, that is to say, its purpose is that people may live together in friendship or in love. This also is why marriage is called a covenant. The Lord's conjunction with man does not exist except in love and charity, for the Lord is love itself and mercy. He wills to save everyone and by His mighty power to draw them towards heaven, that is, towards Himself. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1038)

The Lord's many, many commandments all come down to the simple desire to live together in friendship and love with us. If we are able to keep the commandments, and not just keep them as a technicality, but as an act of love, we are elevated from the status of servants to that of friends.

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In the Word we see a full range of the Covenant, from a promise on behalf of the Lord; to a contract of blessing and cursing; to a pact of friendship. But at heart, it is all the same covenant: a promise from the Lord that He will never cease to support us and uphold us; a plea from the Lord to remain in His care so that He can bless us; and an opportunity from the Lord to enter into an eternal friendship of charity and love. As He teaches us in the prophet Ezekiel:

> Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Ezekiel 37:26-27)