

### **“Alive—Being Fully Alive Relationally”**

Last week we started a new series of messages called “Alive.” Jesus is alive and he clearly wants us to be fully alive. He said, **“I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of” (John 10:10, Msg.)**. That’s fully alive! We started by looking at how God calls us to be spiritually alive. Today we’ll look at how God wants us to be fully alive relationally. Fully alive in our marriages, in our relationship with our kids, in our friendships, in our business relationships. Fully alive.

To get at this we’re going to look at the last book of the Old Testament called Malachi. The prophet Malachi has some very important things to teach us about being fully alive and if we listen we might just get a handle on this real life, this eternal life that’s better than we’ve ever dreamed of.

The old prophet Malachi tells us that being alive relationally is all about promise-making, and promise keeping. The Bible word for that is the word, “covenant.” **Covenant is at the heart of making and keeping promises.**

Let’s talk about covenant for a bit. Because a covenant is not a wish. A covenant is not a casual commitment. A covenant is a solid vow. A covenant is a sacred pledge. It involves the mind, the heart and the soul, it’s a promise that God becomes a part of. So any covenant we make has God in it. And looking through scripture we see God is a big into covenant.

In the story of creation, God made a covenant with Adam and Eve, “I’ll provide for you, give you meaningful work, relational intimacy, that’s my part. Your part is to obey one command.” God keeps his part, they don’t. But one of the important points of that story is that God stays faithful and continues to care for.

Then there’s the story of the flood. Humanity sinks so low that God wipes the slate clean except for Noah and his family. But God makes a covenant with Noah saying, “I will never flood the earth again, and the sign of this covenant will be the rainbow.” Noah says, “Cool.”

Then a one point in history God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah and says, “From you I will build a nation that I will use as a conduit to bless the whole world. And the sign of my covenant with you will be circumcision.” And Abraham said, “How come Noah got the rainbow? I’d rather have the rainbow. If not the rainbow, couldn’t we make it, like, a tattoo or something?” Maybe God decided they needed something to help them remember not to be so casual about the covenant this time. But that was the sign.

That new nation of people struggled to keep their part of the covenant but God kept his part. God made a covenant with Moses. God said to Moses, “Through Abraham and Sarah I started a people, through you I will teach them what it means to follow me.” The sign of that covenant was the 10 commandments written on stone and kept in the ark of the covenant.

Humanity in general, and the Hebrews specifically broke, their end of the covenant, but God did not, and God did not give up on humanity. So God sent his Son, Jesus, to be the fulfillment of the covenant. The faithfulness of Jesus was credited to you and me to fulfill or end of the promise. And the sign of that promise is the cross. In Jesus, God says, “I will love you no matter what.”

The Bible says, **“If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Timothy 2:13, NIV)**. God sets the standard for commitment. “I will keep my covenant to you no matter what.” And that’s good news.

So God sets the standard for what it looks like to make promises. And Malachi says this has some very, very serious implications for you and me. And I’ve got to warn you that Malachi doesn’t pull any punches. He’s a prophet and calls it like he sees it and that’s probably going to make you uncomfortable today.

Malachi says, **“Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?” (Malachi 2:10, NIV)**. In other words, why do we profane the covenant, which is so holy to God, by breaking faith with other people—husband to wife, parent to child, friend to friend? When we break covenants we are desecrating one of the core characteristics of God. And that’s serious business.

So, let’s take some time and look at the main covenant relationships in human life. And maybe as we dig into this you’ll feel challenged to raise the bar in your relationships; maybe you’ll feel a challenge to pursue

God's standard of covenant keeping, to honor your commitments, to honor your word. That's how you'll be fully alive relationally.

Now, one specific area that Malachi talks about is marriage. He says, "You wonder why God can't answer your prayers." Listen to what he says. **"It is 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 marriage covenant" (Malachi 2:14, NIV).**

God is saying, "I take covenants seriously and when you break that marriage covenant you are disconnecting from me. How do you expect to have power, and peace, and joy if you have disconnected from the source of these things? How do you expect me to answer your prayers when you have disconnected from me, because you've broken the marriage covenant?" And he goes on to make one of the strongest statements in Scripture. "I hate divorce," says the Lord. Those are not my words, they're words of scripture.

Like I said, this makes a lot of us uncomfortable. You see, when you got married, if you're married, you didn't make a bargain. You didn't make a transaction. You made a vow. You made a promise. You made a covenant that God was a part of. And the violation of a covenant is a serious deal in God's eyes. Today, lots of us see marriage as a conditional transaction. "If you meet my needs and it makes sense for me to stay married, then I will. If you don't, if I outgrow you, if I get a better offer someplace else, I'm free to leave."

So often we go into marriage thinking our spouse is there to meet our needs and we're there to meet their needs. But that's not at the heart of a covenant. Because what happens when one can't meet the needs of the other? What about the man whose wife has full-blown Alzheimer's disease. She doesn't meet his needs for companionship, or conversation, or recreation, or intimacy. She needs him more and more every day. He quit the job he loved to care for her. Because of a covenant, a covenant that goes beyond his needs, he would tell you that he sees God in her. Marriage can't just be about meeting needs, because when one party can't or won't do it, it all comes crashing down. Covenant goes deeper than need.

If you are here today, and you're married, you made a promise. You wear a ring. Let's take a look at it for a moment. That's a sign of a holy covenant. You promised you'd be a servant, and you'd share what you have. You promised that you would laugh together, and cry together, and dance together. You promised that when you fought, you'd fight fair, and fight clean, and make it through to the other side. You promised that your love would sink deeper than crow's feet, and laugh lines, and receding hairlines, and bulging waistlines, and when the skin underneath her arm starts to get loose and flap around the way that it does—floppy skin.

You didn't say, "I promise to do these things if you behave well, if you stay attractive, if you live up to my standards." You made a vow. How are you doing on your promise? I want to invite every couple in this room to sit down this week, maybe tonight, but sometime this week. Sit down together and ask each other this question: "How's that promise going? How am I doing? Any areas where I'm close to breaking faith with you?" It's worth your best.

A number of years ago a couple's marriage was torn apart by infidelity and lies. Promises were made and broken. They were on the verge of calling it quits but something stirred in both of them. They remembered that a long time earlier, they made a covenant. Everything else was dead. Their emotions were cold. Their lives were separate. Their hearts were worlds apart, but they made a holy promise. They remembered that promise. And they agreed to try again. They got wise counseling and began to talk, and hearts began to melt. It was an amazing day when they renewed their wedding vows, when they started again on the foundation of a covenant. I got to be there for it.

How's your promise going? I think of times since I made that promise over 15 years ago. And I've never taken a big exit, but I've taken little exits. I've withdrawn when I should have engaged. I've gotten cold when I should have connected. I've hidden when I should have been in the light. I want to keep my promise. I want to honor my vow.

How about a word to those of you who are in a different situation. What do you do when a covenant has been broken? Maybe your marriage has ended. Maybe you have a spouse that was unfaithful or abusive,

and refused to change, refused to engage. Maybe there was misbehavior on your part. Maybe, for a number of reasons, trying to rebuild the relationship is no longer a possibility. Sometimes, there's no alternative.

You need to hear this. God says, "I hate divorce." God does **not** say, "I hate divorced people." My parents are divorced and remarried. I know why God says that he hates divorce, because it's gut-wrenching, it's a death, it turns people's worlds upside-down and inside out. It hurts. God hates divorce because he doesn't want us to hurt. Both of my parents have remarried and I love both of their spouses. God's grace is abundant and overwhelming. So if you've experienced a broken marital covenant, receive God's amazing grace and mercy. And you can find that in this church family. It's important that you receive grace.

It's also important that you do something else as we talk about Malachi. It's important that you reset the standard for excellence in relationship—excellence in covenant-keeping. And this takes real character. Because sometimes, people go through the pain of broken covenant, the pain of divorce, but they never reset the standard.

They end up grinding through one relationship after another. Don't do that. You need to stop and reset the bar and say to God, "My value is honoring the covenant, and I will learn from my past. I will take the time to get clarity on what went wrong and to make right whatever is possible for me to make right, and to learn how I need to change. I will grow. I will be in an accountable community. I will do whatever I need to do to live as a covenant-keeper." I hope that you experience grace and I hope you take the effort to reset the bar.

Malachi talks specifically about the covenant between husband and wife. But the principles apply to the covenant we have with our kids. You don't say it formally in a ceremony like you do at a wedding, but the implied covenant as a parent is:

"I'll be there for you no matter what." "I'll love you, no matter what." "I'll equip you for life." "I'll feed you and I'll read to you and I'll teach you how to throw, how to ride a bike. I'll teach you about friends, and about work, and about love. I'll teach you all about men and women—all that I know—and about money. I'll teach you what's right and what's wrong. I'll teach you about God." "And when the time comes, I'll let you go, no strings attached. And I'll do this whether you are genetically gifted or genetically challenged, whether other people in this world think of you as a shining star or a plodder."

Listen, maybe your kid is one of the brightest and the best—gets wonderful grades, goes to the finest schools, embarks on a successful career, makes you look like a genius. Maybe your child will struggle, go through depression, reject your values, run away from your home, defy your God. When you enter parenthood, you take on a 'no matter what' clause. And you only get released when one of you dies. This covenant is about love, and discipline, and structure, and boundaries. At times its about tough love. At times you will have to put some distance between you and your kids' decisions and them the suffer the consequences on their own. But it's still a no matter what covenant. Take a good look at where you are with this.

The same principles of covenant exist in friendship. "Friend" is one of the greatest words in the English language. I think of my closest friend. We've been doing life together for over a decade now. We've watched our kids grow up. I've watched his hair turn gray, he's watched my hair turn loose.

And there are some promises we've made to each other. We've never said them out loud. But we know they're there. He would never betray my trust. He would never violate my confidence. He's not perfect. He does things that are wrong.

We have a truth promise. If he has concerns about me, I know that I'm not going to hear about those concerns from somebody else. He will tell me. And I'll do the same for him. When I get to the end of my life, one of the greatest sources of joy, for me, will be my friend.

How are you doing at the friendship covenant? How are you doing with your promise of loyalty, and your promise of truth, and your promise to care? Is there some repair work that needs to get done in your covenant? Will you do it?

And then last, there are what might be called business covenants. Some of you had your worlds torn apart because people in the business world have broken faith with you. And I want to ask you tonight, will you

have the character to say, "Even though I have been hurt and betrayed in my financial or professional life, I will maintain an excellent standard of covenant-keeping just like God does, even though he's been betrayed.

"I will place integrity above all else, even profits, in my deal-making, in negotiating, in expenses, in supervising, in managing. I will never make a rash promise. I will honor my commitments. I will never say I'm on top of it, if I'm not. I will not steal credit for an idea that doesn't belong to me. Even if other people break faith, my word will be my bond."

If we want to be fully alive relationally, we get back to the basics of covenant making and covenant keeping. Malachi ends this passage of his book with these words. He says, "**Guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith**" (**Malachi 2:16b, NIV**). No matter what anybody else does, you do not break faith, do not break your covenants. And listen, if you feel like you've failed at this, today is not about guilt, it's not about shame. If you feel like you've blown it in covenant making and keeping, now that God's grace is enough. The cross is still God's sign of his covenant that he will always, always, love you.

So imagine if all of us around here were to be first-class covenant keepers. Imagine marriages where every spouse committed, every day, to offering faithful love. Imagine what kind of children we'd raise if every parent was a day-in, day-out, covenant-keeping mom or a covenant-keeping dad.

Imagine how deep the friendships around here would go if they were all marked by loyalty and truth and caring. Imagine how God would be honored throughout the business community if it became common knowledge that when you deal with a Christ-follower, all you need is their word. So I ask you, will you dare to let God set the standard in your relational life? Would you become an excellent covenant-keeper? Will you? And for today that is the good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Senior Pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for his resources in this message.*