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SERIES: CHARACTER OVER COMPROMISE

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TITLE: Honor Your Commitments Even When It's Inconvenient Pt 1

“I wish I would have _____,” fill in the blank. Or “I wonder what would have happened if...” Or “I wish I could go back and do that over.” These are the words of many people today. In fact, we have all said it. We have all felt it. It's not a good feeling, living a life of regret. What is hard is that we cannot change the past. What we can do is start living well today.

Speaking of living well, today we're kicking off a new Back to the Bible series called “**Character Over Compromise.**” In my years as an executive coach and pastor, one thing is clear – your reputation will take years to build, but it can be destroyed in one decision. I mean, look at all the scandals in the news today. Politicians, business leaders, actresses – they make a poor decision and their lives are ruined. There are too many instances to count.

But also consider how quickly just an accusation ruins a person's reputation and career. It doesn't matter if it's true or not. I think about the Brett Kavanaugh hearing. An accusation came out about an event 30 years in the past, but suddenly he and his family are drug through the mud.

This is why character matters to God. A leader in the church is supposed to be above reproach. You find this in Titus and 1 Timothy. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:3, (ESV) “*We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry.*”

Friends, we must do all we can in the Spirit of God, to live in a way that is above reproach. We do not want to behave in a way that causes more offense to the cross of Christ. It's offensive enough to the world.

I believe part of our job here on Earth is to remove obstacles, so people can see Jesus clearly. That's why we must make a commitment today to choose character over compromise: To do life God's way over our own way. We must decide to live for God, and not ourselves or other people. Paul writes in Galatians 1:10, “*For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.*”

So, this month we'll look at different passages on Christian character. It's my prayer that by turning back to the Bible, we will choose character over compromise.

Today we are going to look at a passage in the book of Malachi. In this section of Scripture, Malachi pulls no punches. He is as clear as he can be, with the rebukes of God involving the promises or commitments God's people were breaking. God is a Holy God, perfect in all He is, all He says, and all He does. This means, God keeps His promises, no matter what. If we are to

live well, we must honor our commitments, even when it's inconvenient. I believe every Christian can live well by keeping 3 kinds of promises.

So, let's look together at Malachi Chapter 2. We'll begin in verse 10. Malachi is transitioning from addressing the priests alone to the nation as a whole.

Malachi writes,

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?

In verse 10, we see the first promise we need to keep: **We need to keep our promises to each other.** Malachi asks the people of Israel, “*Don't we all have the same Father?*” In other words, quit thinking you answer to a different Dad. Enough of this “my dad has a different set of rules.” No, we all have the same Heavenly Father with a strict sense of justice.

Malachi then asks, “*Do we not all come from the same Creator God?*” In other words, “are we not all made in His image?” Likewise, “*Do you really think you have a different Creator? Do you really think He made you any different than me, with different rules? Think again! We are all due respect, honor and the keeping of our word.*”

He then asks, “*If this is truly the case, why then are we breaking our covenants or promises with each other? God sees this action as 'faithless.'*” Malachi uses the Hebrew word “bagad” (Bai-gad) for this faithless behavior. He uses this term 5 times in the six verses we'll study in Malachi. Friends, this is serious business. Bagad is better translated “treacherous or deceitful.” It is treacherous and offensive to break your word to each other. Why? Like the Israelites in Malachi's time, it profaned God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. God made a promise to be His God, to bless Him, and give Him hope! This wasn't just true for Abraham, but is true for his true descendants, including those saved by Christ.

When we lie, cheat, steal, deceive, act out of selfishness, or betray, we are defiling that promise. We are saying, “God, I know what you say, but I don't trust you. I know you said you will provide for me, my family. You said, you will supply my needs. But I am tired of waiting. I'll just go on ahead.” We are ultimately calling God a liar.

Malachi's message in verse 10 shouts at us today. Because we have one God who is sovereign, and is the Creator of the universe, who controls all resources. He has said, for those of you who are in Christ – those who are Christians - Jesus will be there for you and provide your needs. As a follower of Christ, we are called to live a life above reproach. Let us live a life of integrity and faithfulness no matter the cost. As Ravi Zacharias put it, “**Integrity** is such an admirable quality, that **even your enemies will trust you** if they know you're a man of **integrity.**”

Psalm 15:1-4 “*Who may worship in your sanctuary, LORD? Who may enter your presence on your holy hill? Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right, speaking the truth from sincere hearts. Those who refuse to gossip or harm their neighbors or speak evil of their friends. Those who despise flagrant sinners, and honor the faithful followers of the LORD, and keep their promises even when it hurts.*”

When Sir Winston Churchill resigned as prime minister of Great Britain on April 5, 1955, it was thought that his age and the desire to permit Sir Anthony Eden greater latitude in the forthcoming elections were the reasons. And they were. But there was one more. The 81-year-old statesman had made a *promise to his wife* to give his remaining years to her in companionship and affection. The late, great man commented about the companionship, “I was married and lived happily ever afterward.”

Promises were made to be kept and not broken. But today, the world view makes promises as loose commitments, or even better, as misspoken words. But God doesn't view them that way. And we shouldn't either.

Today we're considering the importance of keeping our commitments, even when it's inconvenient. It reminds me of a couple of nights ago, I promised I'd play a game with my kids. It was late. I was tired. And I said, “Time for bed.” My youngest said, “Dad, you promised.” I had a decision to make. Was the game that important? No. It was Minecraft. I hate Minecraft, but it was important to my kids. But I do not want to create a legacy of broken promises...even small ones, so we played Minecraft for 15 minutes and then went to bed.

So, I want you to take a moment to pause and think, **what promises have I kept? And which ones have I broken?** Now, I'm not trying to lay on guilt. I'm not trying to bring up your past to shame you. But I know we want to focus on character. So what's a recent promise you've made, but not fulfilled? Can you do anything about it? No? Have you apologized? If not, why not? Have you asked them?

If you've broken a promise, there may be no perfect way to fix it, but I can bet that we can do our best to remedy the situation. So, if you're realizing that you've not fulfilled a promise, pray and contact that person. Say, “I'm sorry. I was wrong. Will you forgive me? What can I do to make it right?” Remember, what Psalm 15 says: God welcomes those who keep their promises even when it hurts.

So the first kind of promise mentioned in this text is the promise to each other.

DISCUSSION:

N: So let's go to Cara [Whitney] and Arnie [Cole] for some perspective here. Cara, I know you're a busy wife and mom. How likely is it that keeping a promise will be convenient?

C: Well, Nat, I don't make a promise that I can't keep, so I don't have to worry about that. I just set my sights real low. I know, if I make a promise, I literally make myself reminders. I email myself. My word is, it means a lot to me. And then I just address things immediately, so I can keep my promise.

N: And I think what you're disciplined in doing is counting the cost, and counting your margin, before you make a promise. And I think a lot of us today struggle with that, because we are over-tapped and we are trying to please too many people. And I think really trying to reprioritize and recalculate really is essential. Arnie, how does whether or not we keep our promises impact non-believers?

A: Oh, it has a tremendous impact in a negative way. It's like a negative testimony. We all have a testimony, whether you witness or not to people; we all have what we're known for: our testimony. For me, I'm kind of old fashioned, kind of like Cara; you make a promise, you need to keep it. My problem is: is when I've made a promise - and someone's made a promise back, and they don't follow their end of the bargain, and they say all kinds of horrible things about you - and, is to keep my side of the deal, as far as being a good ambassador, being a light, when people don't hold their end of the deal. And really why should they, if they're not believers, why should they hold that end of the deal? But even sometimes, when it's you have promises you've made to believers, and they've made them back and they don't hold it up; that seems much more of a rub for me. It's much easier for me to control what I say and what I do, than what someone else does. So I don't know if that's helpful, but that's how I feel.

N: I think that's really helpful. The reality is, we know that God is aware of injustice, and He is aware of it in the world in general. And He's also aware of it to His children. And we know from Scripture, that God says, vengeance is Mine. So when promises are broken to us, I think it's a good reminder for us to pause and turn it over to God, because He knows and He cares. And He has promised that He will make things right in His time, in His way, but that does not remove our obligation to meet promises, even when inconvenient.

Now, let's turn back again to Malachi, chapter 2, verses 11-12.

“Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. ¹² May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!”

Malachi is a man who knows how to cut to the chase. He says, Judah – Israel - has been faithless or treacherous in another way. Malachi says this action is an abomination or a disgusting thing. What is it? The Israelites have profaned the sanctuary or the holiness of the Lord, by marrying someone who did not love or follow the one, true God. They were marrying a daughter of a foreign god.

What's the big deal with that? God was not shy about his instruction to not marry people outside of their faith. You see this in Ezra, Nehemiah, Exodus, and Deuteronomy. God had given specific instructions to marry only those who believe in the one true God.

Isn't this cruel? Doesn't God care about their happiness? The simple answer is that God is concerned with our holiness and not our happiness. But be sure, when we are holy, we are happier. God knows this. Because He loves His people, He says do not intermarry with those of an opposing faith.

There are many today who want to date whoever they want, because of the feelings they have. They think, “This person loves me. They accept me. We enjoy going to movies. We like to hike. We can enjoy our interests, and not let politics or religion affect us.” Oh how deceptive this is!

Friends, think about this. Imagine you and your spouse, or fiancé, or whoever, just watched *Everest* and thought, “Wow. That was intense! Let’s try mountain climbing.” You both agree it would be a lot of fun to go and climb Mt. Whitney. You two carry on with this goal in mind. You work, you play, and you prepare. Finally, the day comes and it’s time for you to leave. You get into the car and take off. You look up and you see your girlfriend or boyfriend driving East on I-80 instead of West. You speak up, “I couldn’t help but notice, we are going East. Mt. Whitney is actually West. It’s not this way.” They respond, “That’s your way of getting there. This is mine. Don’t worry.”

Clearly, my friends, you see the problem. They both have common interests and a sense of loving each other. They both have an end goal in mind, but their means are very different, as is their ultimate trajectory. The same is true for us in our most intimate relationships.

When we say that we love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and all our mind, we will align with what God wills and prescribes. God says, “Don’t marry someone who doesn’t love Me.” He does so because He loves us and wants the best for us. When we say, “God I love you with all I am. I am saved by the blood of Christ,” we say, “We agree to follow your instruction and commands, not out of obligation, but out of love.” When we say this, we agree to die to our emotions and our hormones.

Let me clear something up: What I or the Bible does not say, is that if we do choose to marry an unbeliever, that they won’t eventually repent of their sins and make Jesus their personal Savior. It is possible. It happens. Such a story is that of Lee Strobel. His wife, Leslie became saved and prayed and prayed for Lee. She began to change, and God used her life to impact Lee’s. This is what 1 Peter 3 talks about. Your testimony and lifestyle can impact a spouse. So again, the Bible is not saying it doesn’t happen.

So, what this text *is* saying is that if you haven’t found your spouse yet, decide here and now that you will look for a Christian who loves God with all their heart. It doesn’t matter what age you are, make this commitment to God. He has commanded you to do so.

I decided when I was in my early teens that I would marry only a Christian girl. I prayed for her. In 1997, I met this middle school girl named Tiffany. She loved God and I thought, “She’s cool.” Three years later, our paths would cross again, and she was still following God. The long and the short of it is, she was a godly woman who would become my wife. God has used her so mightily in my life. Her example, her expectations, her focus as a Christian wife, has eternal impact on me. To have missed this, I am convinced, could have been detrimental.

So the second kind of promise we need to keep is our promise to God.

And let me just point out that keeping our promises to God goes far beyond the situation of this text. Let’s just think about a couple New Testament passages. First, consider the Great Commission. Jesus said in Matthew 28, “*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and **make** disciples of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ **teaching** them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Have you ever signed an agreement without fully reading the fine print? I do. I have. I recently signed a document to purchase a house. I'll be honest; I read most of it. But surely not all of it. But I signed it anyway. Was my faith in my agent well placed? I believe so. Yes. Was I negligent in my reading of the contract? Yes. Regardless, my agreement was well placed.

We do the same with our faith. Jesus says, "Follow me." And we go. We don't count the cost, or read the commitment. We make the choice to follow our Lord.

N: So Cara and Arnie, let's talk for a bit. Arnie, have you ever been surprised at the level of commitment it takes to follow the Lord?

A: You know, having been raised in a strong Christian family, and with my parents as missionaries in Indonesia with the Dani people, I always knew it took a big commitment, a huge commitment. And I was like, "No, thank you. Why would I want to do that?" So yes, for me, I've seen what kind of a commitment it takes to be a true Christ follower and not a cultural Christian. And it was just a simple decision of, "No, I don't want to do that. And I want to live for myself. And really, how do I know for sure? You know, there's lots of ways to Heaven; Jesus is one of them, maybe. Why would I want to go crazy and be a fanatic?"

N: How has that impacted how you approach nonbelievers? Because you've had a very unique perspective and probably a very accurate picture of what being a Christ follower can mean. How has that impacted you, with reaching out to those who are far from God?

A: I'm kind of blunt. Probably the most dangerous - well, how would you say it - the most likely person to end up in Hell is a cultural Christian. You know, the kind of guy that slaps you on the back and says, "Hey, you know, I don't want to go to Heaven because none of my friends are there," those guys are pretty easy to talk to. It's the cultural Christian, is where they feel, "No, no, no, there's no commitment needed. Yeah, Jesus is the way." They're not even lukewarm, because there's no warmth to them at all. Those are the people to me that are the biggest problems, and they're the easiest to offend. Probably my take is different, but I'd much rather hang out with the guy who tells me that he and all his friends are going to Hell, than the cultural Christian, if you will.

N: Well, and I think you've identified a real problem that's gone on for centuries, but I think is maybe magnified nowadays, because you know, on social media, a place where a lot of us live, you put down what's your religious worldview, and you see a lot of people put Christian, but the reality is there's very little, at least digital evidence. And some of us know that there's real life evidence as well. And so it's that cultural Christian, and I think that they are some of the hardest people to talk to, because they are very flippant about faith, and that they have what we call maybe like a nominal faith. And whenever I think about those people, I always think about Christ's Word, you know, on that day where people cry out, "Lord, Lord." And He says, "I never knew you, you workers of iniquity." So that tells you, there are going to be people who identified as a cultural Christian, but the reality is, they never put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and it never

transformed who they were. And that is a scary thought, but that should also give us motivation to reach out to even the difficult people who may be blind. Cara, can you share some commitments to God that you intend to keep these days?

C: I've made one commitment to Him, and it was in my kitchen, when I just gave Him everything, and it was to share the Gospel. I made a commitment to Him, that I would bring glory to Him, and make Him known through whatever was going on in my life. And so that's what I do. I don't do it well all the time, because there was a period, where there was a few months where I felt like I was sort of in this spiritual wasteland. But then what I did was, I backtracked: went back to falling in love with Jesus all over again, and then boosted my commitment to that. So, no, I mean, that has not changed; it's just sharing the Gospel. Yeah, it is still the same, because when I made that commitment to God, I thought I had cancer. I went through some crazy health things and I thought, "Okay, if I have cancer, then let me use this as a tool to get to people, to bring glory to God through it." But Arnie, you do the same thing.

AT 28:55, IS SOMETHING EDITED OUT HERE???? ARNIE IS NOT TALKING ABOUT PROMISES TO GOD HERE OR WHAT CARA WAS JUST TALKING ABOUT. THIS SEEMS LIKE AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT DISCUSSION.

Maybe something from the below that leads into this, like whatever Cara said right before (were these recorded?).....

A: So Nat, I've got a question for you ...

C: Isn't that the same thing

N; The motivation is different But the prayer is still the same

C: Yeah, it is the same because when I made that commitment to God ...

A: Yeah. I just look at King David. You know, he had won all those battles, so he decided to not show up at the battlefield for a few weeks. And then he started watching Bathsheba take a bath on the patio, and then it just goes downhill from there. I'm sure he didn't make a decision that he wanted to mess up his life and stay out of the battle. It was just, "Hey, you know, this is pretty casual, so.."

C: It's modern day chicks and Netflix", that's what's going on.

N: Yeah. I couldn't have said it better myself. And I think it was CS Lewis who said, you know, *There isn't really a problem of pain. It's really the problem of pleasure.* And so often, I mean, pain honestly is that megaphone, is, as Lewis would say, to a deaf world, pain keeps us incredibly close to God. It's affluence, it's pleasure, it's the things that get us to coasting, what Arnie is talking about. Those become the real issue. It is the chicks and Netflix, right? And so I think we need to be cognizant of how much we are leaning into the coasting life and the pleasurable life, versus the life on mission, and the life at the battlefield, engaging in spiritual warfare. Now, granted, when we engage in spiritual warfare, it's going to come at a cost, but we

must never forget the cost that Christ paid for us. So Arnie, you mentioned this before, but why is it so important to marry someone who shares the same belief, that belief in Christ?

A: You know, the easy answer is, if you're both nonbelievers, it's very easy. It's wide open and anybody can say, "Oh yeah, yeah, you've got your faith. I've got mine." You reverse that and if you're a strong Christ follower, and not marrying someone who's a believer, or a cultural Christian, that is a huge self-inflicted injury, that most young people have a hard time seeing. But as people grow older together, you've got a biblical commitment and then you've got a worldly commitment. Which do you want your partner to lean towards as you grow old together?

N: Yeah. I remember hearing the motivational speaker, Tony Robbins, say, *A millimeter changes the trajectory by a mile*. You know, if you hit a golf ball, and even if you just change the position of the head on the club just a millimeter, trust me, where that ball goes is a completely different place. It may be even a different county, depending on how bad you are, if you're anything like me, but it's so true for our beliefs. Even just a subtle difference there, or may seem subtle, will actually cause a great schism, especially as life progresses. Great perspective. Cara, when you say that you love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, what does that ultimately mean?

C: Well, I think it is exactly what it says. You've got to make Him your everything. He comes before everything. I think that's challenging though, because to me, when I hear that, I ultimately fall short, because I always have my sin nature coming in and distracting me. So I always feel inadequate to this. I do love Him with all my heart, and my soul, my mind. I mean, He's everything, but there's distractions. And so I'm a work in progress.