

## Commitment: What a Bargain!

By Rev. Jonathan Dinger

**C**ontracts. Pre-nuptial agreements. “You scratch my back; I’ll scratch yours.” Political favors. Interest groups. We live in a world that works on a transactional basis—you provide a service and then get paid in some way. We all know how this operates in the workplace. I put in a full day’s work for a full day’s pay.

We also know how this works in relationships. When we are invited to dinner, we may hesitate because we wonder how we’re going to reciprocate and offer the same level of hospitality to our friends. We even hesitate to accept a generous gift because we may be under some kind of unwritten obligation to provide payback.

Even in church we sometimes fall into a wages mentality. “I volunteer as a Sunday School teacher—my son should get picked to play Joseph in the program!” “I come to church every Sunday—God should answer my prayers the way I want.”



Sadly, the idea of payback creeps into families as well. Divorces that are based on being unfulfilled or on “irreconcilable differences” reveal this way of thinking. Our children should obey us and be appreciative because of our role or because we sacrificed to provide good things for them. We believe that if we put something in, we should get something out.

But that’s not how commitment works. At least not the kind of commitment we know from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus’ commitment to us is not based in any way on what we have provided for Him. God’s commitment in taking on human flesh and taking our sins upon Himself is not a payoff for what we have done or may do in the future. In fact, the Scriptures tell us in several places and from several authors that, “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8), “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). And, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you . . .” (John 15:16).

Donald Miller, in his book *Searching for God Who Knows What*, speaks about the dangers of a Christianity that is simply a set of rules or a formula—what might be called a transactional faith:

*I began to wonder if becoming a Christian did not work more like falling in love than agreeing with a list of true principles . . . What if the gospel of Jesus was an invitation to know God? Earthly love . . . is temporal and slight so that it has to be given again and again in order for us to feel any sense of security; but God’s love, God’s voice and presence, would instill our souls with such affirmation we would need nothing more and would cause us to love other people so much we would be willing to die for them (Thomas Nelson, pp.46-47).*

My daughter just went back to Concordia University in Nebraska after Christmas break. The weather had been terrible, and she needed a ride from Omaha to Seward. Her original plans fell through and she became pretty worried. She hated to impose on anyone to give her a 90-minute ride in the dark and snow. She called home in

February 7-14  
is National  
Marriage Week

# Commitment in Uncommitted Times

By Peter L. Larson and Amy Olson-Sigg

*"I take thee to be my husband/wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love and honor you all the days of my life."*

Most married couples repeated some variation of these public vows during their wedding ceremony. They promise to stick with it until death do us part! They acknowledge that there will be ups and downs, good times and bad, but they vow to stay together forsaking all others.

This being the case, why is the divorce rate for first marriages 50 percent? The divorce rate is even higher for second and third marriages, climbing with each subsequent trip to the altar. Ironically, it seems the more times an individual repeats these vows, the less likely they are to uphold them!

## Is It Our Culture?

Is it something about our culture or the times in which we live? The themes of our consumer driven lifestyles often center around instant gratification:

- Everything should be quick, convenient and easy.
- Whatever I purchase should make me feel good (all the time).
- If it ceases to please me, I can discard or exchange it.

It is now so easy to go to my computer and download a film to watch on demand. It is convenient to use online bill paying instead of writing checks, addressing envelopes, and licking stamps. It is also nice to know I can exchange my smart phone if it starts acting up. Quicker, easier, and satisfaction guaranteed are the keys to success for any product, business, or program in today's business climate.

While this approach to business works well for establishing consumer satisfaction, it does not translate well to the relational aspects of our lives. In fact, this instant gratification approach to life may actually harm the quest for mature committed relationships while fueling unrealistic expectations.

## Three Big Challenges for Commitment

**1. Real commitment in great marriages does not happen instantly.**

Marriage takes commitment for the long haul. Newlyweds are often lovestruck and infatuated when they enter into marriage. Unrealistic expectations are the

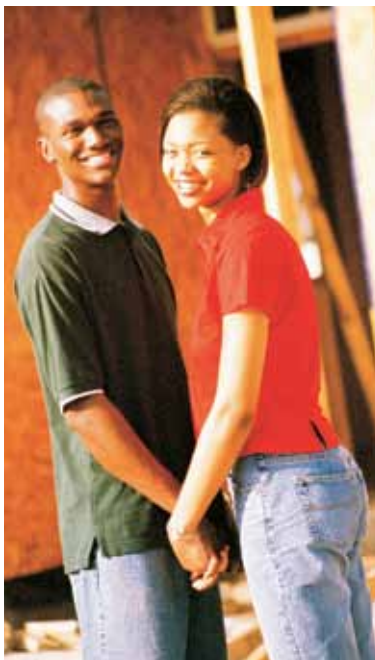
some distress. My response: Call your friends. You discover pretty quickly who operates on a model of relationship based on payback or commitment. Friends who are counting on a payback aren't really friends. They will usually do what either doesn't put them out or will give them a good return on their time and effort. Real friends never count the cost. They simply do what's needed just because of who you are. Two of her friends shocked her, when they immediately expressed their willingness to simply drop everything, and do whatever it took to get her safely back to school. No payback. Just friendship.

We live in a world characterized by contracts, agreements, and transactions. But we have a God who models a relationship that is highly existential. In other words, He loves you simply because you exist. Isn't that the quality of relationship God hopes our families will model to each other and the world? That we love our kids, just because they're our kids? That our kids love us, do their chores, go to church and think of others just because we're family? Not for some payoff. Not because it's their duty. Just because of who they are and who we are.

I've often said to couples in counseling, "Do you want to know when things are really starting to get right in your relationship? When you discover that your joy arises from the other person's joy. You hurt when they hurt. You long for them to know delight and joy. Now you've got something cooking!" As long as our joy revolves around ourselves, we will never experience the joy God has in store for us—a joy He experienced on Calvary. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus... who for the joy set before Him (our joy!) endured the cross, scorning its shame . . . ." (Hebrews 12:2).

Commitment in our broken world involves obligation, payback, and wages. Commitment from God involves acting simply because you ARE. When we finally accept and rejoice that we are valuable to God not because of what we've produced but just because we exist, then our vision and heart begins to change. When we begin to see others as God has always seen us—as precious and of inestimable worth regardless of our history—that's when Christ-like commitment begins to form and take shape in our lives and in our families. That's when we go to the mat for others—because Christ has gone to the cross for us.

*Jonathan Dinger is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Pocatello, Idaho. He is married to Teresa and they have two children.*



norm for engaged couples. But newly married couples must work out roles and responsibilities, learn to manage their finances as a team, balance their time together and apart, and deal with friends and family in productive ways. Managing these areas takes time and effort but leads to a stronger marriage.

## 2. A sustained lifelong marriage relationship does not always feel good.

Research has shown there are seasons in a marriage, with natural ups and downs. In one national survey of households and families, sociologist and researcher Linda Waite completed a follow-up study with married couples who had described themselves as “unhappy.” Of those who stayed married, 86 percent reported their marriages had become happier five years later (*The Case for Marriage*, Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Transitions such as moves, births, changing jobs, retiring, or embracing the empty nest years will all cause fluctuations in marriage satisfaction. But for those couples who stay committed to going the distance, they find the good outweighs the bad and they learn they can count on one another in all seasons of their marriage.

## 3. Commitment and a happy marriage go together.

The happiest couples also have high levels of commitment. In a study of 5,000 married couples who took ENRICH, we found that 95 percent of the happiest couples (called Vitalized) had high scores on commitment, but only 23 percent of the most unhappy couples (called Devitalized) scored high on commitment.

These findings demonstrate the importance of commitment, but also raise an interesting question. Does strong commitment lead to a healthy marriage? Or, do couples in healthy marriages simply have an easier time remaining committed? Perhaps both are true. But either way it is important for couples to foster both their commitment to marriage and build solid relationship skills (communication, conflict resolution and flexibility) in order to enjoy a happy marriage.

## Building Commitment in Your Marriage:

### So what can you do to build commitment and a happier marriage?

First, you can discuss with your partner your commitment. Each can share your response to two questions from PREPARE/ENRICH. **On a scale from 1 to 10**

**1 = Low 5 = Moderate 10 = Extremely high**

- (1) How committed are you to making our marriage last a lifetime.
- (2) How willing are you to do whatever it takes to improve our marriage.

## Second, look for opportunities to improve your marriage such as the following:

- (1) Do a date night once a month;
- (2) Attend a marriage enhancement program;
- (3) Talk about how you met and why you initially committed to each other;
- (4) Read and discuss a book on marriage;
- (5) Take and discuss a couple assessment like the *Couple Checkup* ([www.couplecheckup.com](http://www.couplecheckup.com));
- (6) Renew your marriage vows on your next wedding anniversary.

*The authors work for PREPARE/ENRICH, which is based in Minneapolis, Minn. For more information, go to [www.prepare-enrich.com](http://www.prepare-enrich.com) or call 1-800-331-1661.*

## ‘I Will’

Resources for strengthening marriages abound. Here is a sample:

### Experiences facilitated by marriage specialists

The “PREPARE-ENRICH Program” uses an online inventory that identifies a couple’s strength and growth areas. A trained facilitator then guides the couple to understand their results while teaching proven relationship skills. For more information and to find a facilitator near you, go to [www.prepare-enrich.com](http://www.prepare-enrich.com).

“Weekend to Remember,” a marriage conference sponsored by Family Life, provides a weekend get-away to refresh your marriage relationship. Speakers share life stories and proven methods to revitalize your relationship in a setting that eliminates daily distractions. To learn more and find a conference near you, go to [www.familylife.com](http://www.familylife.com).

### A self-guided option

*The Couple Checkup: Find Your Relationship Strengths*, David H. Olson, Amy Olson-Sigg and Peter J. Larson; Thomas Nelson, 2008. Whether dating, engaged or married, the authors recommend couples take care of their relationship in the same way they make sure their vehicle will run well and long, with a periodic relationship tune-up. This guide will help you ‘do-it-yourself’ with insights and information. The book also provides access to an online Couple Checkup enabling couples to personalize the information by determining their unique strengths and areas for growth.

For this and several other marriage resources, go to [www.prepare-enrich.com](http://www.prepare-enrich.com).



HOME BASE ■ Vol. 4 No. 9 ■ February 2010

Edited by Robin Fossum and Dr. Steve Christopher, Interim Associate Director, LCMS Family Ministry. Designed by Karen Eggemeyer. A publication of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, District and Congregational Services—Family Ministry © 2010

TO SUBSCRIBE: Go to [www.lcms.org](http://www.lcms.org) and click “Sign up: Receive eNews”

TO REPRINT: Permission is granted to reprint articles from Home Base with the line “Reprinted with permission of LCMS Family Ministry.”