

The Sermon on the Mount, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: God's Design for Marriage

Matthew 5:31–32

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson must hold up God's design for marriage clearly and without apology: one man and one woman, joined by God into a one-flesh union meant to last for life. Jesus confronts a culture that had trivialized divorce and reasserts the permanence and sacredness of the marriage covenant, naming sexual immorality as the grievous exception. The central truths here are clear and not in dispute among those who take Scripture seriously: marriage is a divine covenant, not a human contract; God hates the devastation of divorce; and the marriage bond is weighty enough that it must not be broken lightly. Teach these plainly and let them stand.

At the same time, this is the most pastorally sensitive lesson in the study, and it requires unusual wisdom and tenderness. Your class will almost certainly include people touched by divorce, their own or that of those they love, and a careless or harsh handling of this text can wound deeply and needlessly. Honesty also requires acknowledging that the harder questions, what Scripture permits regarding remarriage after a divorce that has already happened, have been studied earnestly for centuries by godly believers who revere the Word and have reached different conclusions. The clearest and safest ground, the path on which a believer cannot go wrong, is always to remain unmarried, to pursue reconciliation, or to honor the covenant until death (1 Corinthians 7:10–11, 39). Beyond that safe ground, the wisest course is to teach what is clear with conviction, to walk humbly where sincere students of Scripture have differed, and to call each believer to be fully convinced in their own mind before God (Romans 14:5, 23).

So aim, with your class, at three things held firmly together. First, lift up God's design for marriage as good, serious, and worth honoring, without softening it. Second, refuse to wield that standard as a weapon against the wounded; God hates divorce, but he does not hate the divorced, and his grace reaches every broken story. Third, point past mere rule-keeping to the covenant faithfulness God is forming in his people, and to the Christ whose forgiveness and renewing power are deeper than any failure. Keep the tone shepherding, not prosecuting. You are handling lives, not just arguments.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus reaches back past the divorce certificate of his day to God's original design for marriage as a permanent, one-flesh union (compare v. 31–32 with Matthew 19:4–6). What does it mean that marriage is a covenant joined by God, and how does that differ from the view that marriage is simply a contract between two people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin where Jesus begins, with God's original design, not with the regulations of divorce. When the Pharisees later pressed him on this same subject, Jesus took them back to the beginning, to the Creator who made them male and female and said the two shall become one flesh (Matthew 19:4–6). The foundation of all biblical teaching on marriage is creation: God designed it, God joins it, and what God joins, no one should casually separate.

Teach the difference between a covenant and a contract, because it is the heart of this question. A contract is a conditional agreement between two parties, entered for mutual benefit and dissolved when it no longer serves. A covenant is a binding, solemn commitment made before God, grounded not in convenience but in faithfulness. Marriage in Scripture is a covenant (Malachi 2:14), a divine joining, not a private arrangement two people may revise at will.

Show how deeply this dignifies marriage. The word translated joined pictures being glued or welded together; the union is real, not merely legal. And Scripture lifts marriage higher still, making it a living picture of the covenant love between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:31–32). To treat marriage as a disposable contract is not only to wrong a spouse; it is to obscure the faithful love of God that marriage was designed to display.

Apply this against the contract mentality that saturates our culture, the assumption that a marriage lasts only as long as both partners feel fulfilled. Help your class see that the covenant view is not a heavier chain but a more secure foundation. A love that is promised, and kept, through hard seasons is a far greater thing than a love that lasts only while it is easy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Marriage rooted in God's design at creation (Matthew 19:4–6; Genesis 2:24)
- The difference between a covenant and a contract (Malachi 2:14)
- The one-flesh union as a real, God-made joining, not merely a legal arrangement
- Marriage as a picture of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31–32)
- The contract mentality of our culture versus covenant faithfulness

Discussion Prompts

- What is the practical difference between treating marriage as a covenant and as a contract?
- How does it change marriage to see it as joined by God, not just by two people?
- Why is a love that is promised and kept greater than a love that lasts only while it is easy?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think about the promises and commitments in your own life. Where are you tempted to treat your word as binding only while it remains convenient, and what would covenant faithfulness look like in your closest relationships?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question broadens the principle of covenant faithfulness beyond marriage to the student's whole pattern of keeping commitments. The culture of disposability that cheapens marriage also shapes how we treat promises, friendships, church membership, and our word in general. The question invites self-examination at that level.

Help students see that faithfulness is a single character trait that either grows or weakens across all our commitments. The person who treats every promise as binding only while convenient will struggle to be faithful in marriage too. Conversely, learning to keep our word in small things trains the heart for covenant faithfulness in the largest things.

Aim for one concrete area of greater faithfulness this week. Perhaps a commitment they have been treating lightly, a relationship they have let drift, a word they have not kept. The goal is to let Jesus' exalted vision of covenant reshape not only how they think about marriage but how they keep every promise.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithfulness as a single character formed across all our commitments
- The culture of disposability shaping how we keep our word
- Small faithfulness as training for covenant faithfulness
- Letting Christ's vision of covenant reshape all our promises

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you treat your word as binding only while it is convenient?
- How does faithfulness in small commitments prepare us for the largest ones?
- What is one commitment you could keep more faithfully this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus confronts a culture that had made divorce easy and respectable through proper procedure (v. 31). How can religious people use technically correct rules to do things that violate the heart of God, and where do we see that same temptation in ourselves?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the religious sleight of hand Jesus exposes. The men of his day had taken Moses' regulation, which was given to restrain and limit the damage of divorce in a hard-hearted age,

and turned it into a permission slip. By following the proper procedure, the certificate, they could do something God hated and still feel righteous. The paperwork laundered the betrayal.

Teach the broader principle: religious people are perennially tempted to use technically correct rules to evade the actual will of God. Jesus repeatedly confronted this, as when the Pharisees used the tradition of Corban to avoid caring for their parents while keeping a religious technicality (Mark 7:9–13). A rule kept on the surface can become a tool for disobedience underneath.

Connect this to the whole thrust of the Sermon. Jesus consistently drives past external compliance to the heart. A man could keep the letter of the divorce law and shatter the heart of marriage; he could obey the procedure and disobey God. The greater righteousness refuses to hide behind technicalities and asks instead what God actually desires.

Help students see this tendency in themselves, not just in ancient Pharisees. We are all capable of finding the loophole, keeping the letter while breaking the spirit, doing what we want and dressing it in a justification. The cure is a heart that wants what God wants, not merely a conscience satisfied by technical compliance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Turning a restraining regulation into a permission slip
- Using technically correct rules to evade the will of God (Mark 7:9–13)
- The letter kept while the spirit is broken
- The greater righteousness that asks what God actually desires
- Recognizing the loophole-seeking tendency in ourselves

Discussion Prompts

- How can a rule kept on the surface become a tool for disobedience?
- Where have you seen religious technicalities used to justify wrong?
- What is the cure for a heart that looks for loopholes?

Question 4

Student Question:

Be honest about whether you have ever used a technicality, a rule kept on the surface, to justify something you knew in your heart was wrong. What does this passage say to that habit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks for honest self-examination about using technicalities to justify what we know is wrong. The aim is to bring the abstract critique of Pharisaism home to the student's own conscience. Most of us can recall a time we satisfied the letter while violating the spirit.

Help students recognize the subtle forms this takes: the carefully worded half-truth that is technically not a lie, the commitment kept just barely enough to avoid blame, the rule followed precisely so we can do as we please within it. The conscience is easily quieted by technical compliance.

Move toward repentance rather than mere insight. Where there is a technicality currently being used to justify something the student knows in their heart is wrong, the call is to stop hiding behind it and to ask what God actually wants. The greater righteousness lives in the open before God, not in the shelter of a loophole.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest examination of our own use of technicalities
- The subtle forms of keeping the letter while breaking the spirit
- A conscience quieted by technical compliance
- Repentance over mere insight

Discussion Prompts

- Have you used a technicality to justify something you knew was wrong?
- What forms does that take in your life?
- What would it look like to stop hiding behind the loophole?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus names sexual immorality as the grievous exception that can break the marriage covenant (v. 32). Why does Jesus treat the marriage bond as so serious that only such a fundamental betrayal is named here, and what does this reveal about the weight God places on the one-flesh union?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Center this question on the weight of the marriage bond revealed by the nature of the exception. Jesus names sexual immorality as the grievous betrayal that can break the covenant. The very narrowness of the exception underscores how serious and how durable God considers the one-flesh union to be. Only a fundamental violation of the covenant is named; ordinary disappointments, conflicts, and hardships are not grounds for shattering what God has joined.

Teach why sexual immorality strikes so uniquely at the heart of marriage. Because marriage is a one-flesh union, sexual betrayal assaults the very thing that makes a marriage a marriage. It is a covenant-breaking act in a way that other sins, grievous as they may be, are not in the same direct sense. This is why Jesus names it specifically.

Be careful and balanced here. To say that sexual immorality can break the covenant is not to say it must end the marriage; Scripture and the gospel hold out the hope of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration even after such betrayal, and many marriages have been rebuilt by grace. The exception describes a covenant that has been broken, not a command to divorce. Help your class hold the seriousness and the hope together.

Draw out the larger truth about how God values marriage. The fact that he guards it so jealously, that he treats its violation so seriously, tells us how precious it is to him. God is not indifferent to marriage; he made it, he joins it, he grieves its breaking, and he calls his people to honor it. The weight Jesus places on the bond is a measure of its glory.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The narrowness of the exception underscoring the weight of the bond
- Sexual immorality as a unique assault on the one-flesh union
- The exception describing a broken covenant, not a command to divorce
- The hope of repentance and restoration even after betrayal
- God's jealous guarding of marriage as a measure of its preciousness

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus name only such a fundamental betrayal as the exception?
- What does the seriousness of the bond tell us about how God values marriage?
- How do we hold together the seriousness of betrayal and the hope of restoration?

Question 6

Student Question:

Marriage is meant to be a place of covenant faithfulness, but faithfulness is built or eroded in small daily choices long before any crisis. What is one small way you can strengthen covenant faithfulness in your marriage, or honor God's design for marriage if you are single, this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves from the crisis of a broken covenant to the daily, ordinary choices that build or erode faithfulness long before any crisis. Most marriages are not lost in a single dramatic moment but worn down over years of small neglects, or strengthened over years of small kindnesses. The question invites attention to those small choices.

For married students, help them think concretely: guarding the marriage from the slow drift of neglect, speaking words of honor rather than contempt, refusing the small compromises that erode trust, investing time and tenderness before there is ever a crisis. Covenant faithfulness is mostly built in unremarkable daily faithfulness.

For single students, honor God's design just as concretely: cultivating purity, valuing marriage rightly, supporting the marriages around them, preparing their own hearts for covenant faithfulness should God lead them to marry. The call to honor marriage belongs to the whole church, not only to the married.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithfulness built or eroded in small daily choices
- Guarding marriage from the slow drift of neglect
- Honoring God's design whether married or single
- The whole church's responsibility to value marriage rightly

Discussion Prompts

- What small daily choices most strengthen or erode covenant faithfulness?
- What is one way to invest in your marriage, or honor marriage as a single person, this week?
- How can the church as a whole better value and support marriage?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus shows deep concern for the vulnerable party who is wronged when a marriage is broken (v. 32). How does God's heart for the wounded and the wronged show through this teaching, and how should that shape the way the church cares for those affected by divorce?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw attention to a dimension of this text that is easily missed: Jesus' concern for the vulnerable party. In the culture of casual divorce, it was the woman who was left exposed, often economically destitute and socially shamed, when a man discarded her. Jesus' teaching protects her. His tightening of the divorce ethic is not cold legalism; it is mercy toward the one who would otherwise be wronged.

Teach that this reflects the consistent heart of God for the vulnerable and the wronged. Throughout Scripture God defends the widow, the orphan, the abandoned, and the powerless (Psalm 68:5; James 1:27). His standards for marriage are not arbitrary restrictions but expressions of his protective love for people who can be deeply harmed when covenants are broken.

Apply this to the way the church cares for those affected by divorce. If Jesus' concern is for the wounded and the wronged, then the church must be a place of refuge and compassion for them, not a place of whispered judgment. Many who have walked through divorce, especially those who were sinned against, carry not only grief but shame, and they need the church to embody Christ's tenderness toward them.

Help your class see that honoring God's design and caring for the wounded are not in tension; both flow from the same heart of God. We uphold the sacredness of marriage precisely because we love people and grieve what its breaking does to them. A church that truly honors marriage will also be the safest place in the world for those whose marriages have broken.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus' teaching as protection for the vulnerable, not cold legalism
- God's consistent heart for the wronged, the widow, and the abandoned (Psalm 68:5; James 1:27)
- God's standards as expressions of protective love
- The church as a refuge of compassion for those affected by divorce
- Honoring marriage and caring for the wounded as flowing from one heart

Discussion Prompts

- How does Jesus' concern for the wronged party show through this teaching?
- How should the church care for those who carry the pain of a broken marriage?
- Why are honoring God's design and showing compassion not in conflict?

Question 8

Student Question:

Whatever your situation, consider those around you who carry the pain of a broken marriage. How can you show them the compassion of Christ rather than judgment, while still honoring God's design, and what is one way you could be a source of grace to someone hurting in this way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to consider how they personally treat those touched by divorce. It is easy, especially for those who have not walked through it, to handle the subject with a coldness or self-righteousness that wounds. The question calls for the compassion of Christ.

Help students hold the two things Jesus holds: a high view of marriage and a tender heart toward the broken. We do not have to choose between truth and compassion; the gospel refuses that false choice. We can honor God's design while weeping with those who weep and refusing to add shame to grief.

Move toward one concrete act of grace. Perhaps reaching out to someone walking through a divorce, listening without judgment, offering practical help to a single parent, or simply refusing to participate in gossip about a broken marriage. Encourage students to be, for someone hurting, a tangible expression of the compassion of Christ this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Examining how we treat those touched by divorce
- Holding a high view of marriage with a tender heart toward the broken
- Refusing the false choice between truth and compassion
- Concrete acts of grace toward the hurting

Discussion Prompts

- How can you show Christ's compassion to someone hurting from a broken marriage?
- Where might self-righteousness creep into how you handle this subject?
- What is one way you could be a source of grace to someone this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

This is one of the most pastorally sensitive teachings in all of Scripture, and faithful Christians who revere God's Word have wrestled long and humbly with its harder questions. Begin with what is clearest: God's design is one man and one woman for life, and the safest ground is always to remain single, to seek reconciliation, or to honor the covenant until death (1 Corinthians 7:10–11, 39). How does holding firmly to what is clear, while walking humbly and compassionately where godly believers have differed, help us honor both the truth of God's Word and the people who carry real wounds?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, and it calls for both conviction and humility. Lead your class first to the ground that is clear and not in dispute among those who take Scripture seriously. God's design from the beginning is one man and one woman joined for life (Matthew 19:4–6). God hates the devastation that divorce brings (Malachi 2:16). Marriage is a covenant, not a disposable contract. On these truths there is no wavering, and you should teach them with full confidence.

Then lead them to what the apostle Paul calls the safe ground, the path on which a believer cannot go wrong. To the married and to those whose marriages are broken, Paul gives counsel that is always safe: remain unmarried, or else be reconciled (1 Corinthians 7:10–11); and a spouse is bound as long as the other lives, free to remarry only in the Lord after death (1 Corinthians 7:39; Romans 7:2–3). To remain single, to seek reconciliation, or to honor the covenant until death are paths on which there is no possibility of sin. That is solid rock under the feet of anyone unsure.

Now teach with honesty and humility about the harder questions, because integrity requires it. What Scripture permits regarding remarriage after a divorce that has already occurred has been studied earnestly for centuries by faithful believers who love the Lord and revere his Word, and they have reached different conclusions. Many in churches of Christ hold that divorce and remarriage are permitted only for the cause of sexual immorality, taking Matthew 19:9 and 5:32

as binding in every age. Others add the desertion of an unbelieving spouse, drawing on Paul's words that the believer in such a case is not enslaved (1 Corinthians 7:15). These are not careless people; they are serious students of the same Scriptures.

Be clear that humility does not mean anything goes. Some conclusions are plainly excluded: polygamy, which Scripture rules out, and divorce for trivial or selfish causes, which flatly contradicts what Jesus taught. The exception Jesus names is sexual immorality, a grievous betrayal, not mere incompatibility or inconvenience. Within the range of views that take the marriage covenant seriously, more than one may stand; but views that trivialize the covenant cannot. Teach your class to distinguish honest difference among the reverent from the looseness Jesus condemned.

Bring them to the posture Scripture itself prescribes for matters where conscience and conviction must be weighed: let each one be fully convinced in his own mind, for whatever is not from faith is sin (Romans 14:5, 23). Urge every believer to study the passages prayerfully and honestly, to be persuaded before God, and to walk by the conclusion they can hold with a clear conscience, rather than leaning on what a preacher or a tradition has assumed without examination. And close on grace, always on grace. The God who calls us to take his Word seriously is the same God who is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse (1 John 1:9). He hates divorce because of what it does to his people, but he does not hate the divorced; he loves them, restores them, and makes all things new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- What is clear and not in dispute: God's design of one man and one woman for life (Matthew 19:4–6; Malachi 2:16)
- Paul's safe ground: remain single, seek reconciliation, or honor the covenant until death (1 Corinthians 7:10–11, 39)
- Honest acknowledgment that godly believers have differed on the harder questions of remarriage (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15)
- Views plainly excluded: polygamy and divorce for trivial or selfish causes
- Each believer fully convinced before God, walking by faith and a clear conscience (Romans 14:5, 23)
- Grace and restoration for the divorced, who God loves even as he hates divorce (1 John 1:9; 2 Corinthians 5:17)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the clearest, safest ground for anyone unsure about their situation?
- How does humility about the harder questions differ from saying anything goes?
- How can we honor both the truth of God's Word and the people who carry real wounds?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Jesus has lifted marriage back to God's beautiful and serious design, with both high standards and deep compassion. Where is he calling you to a more faithful, covenant-shaped way of living and loving, and what is one specific step you sense him inviting you to take this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone invites students to name where Christ is calling them to a more faithful, covenant-shaped way of living and loving. Because this lesson touches such varied situations, the application will differ widely: a renewed investment in a marriage, a step toward reconciliation, a repentance, a commitment to purity, an act of compassion toward the wounded, or a resolve to study these passages prayerfully and be fully convinced.

Guide students to a step that fits their own situation honestly. For the married, perhaps a concrete act of covenant faithfulness. For the divorced, perhaps receiving God's grace afresh and walking forward in faith. For the single, perhaps honoring God's design in how they live and how they support the marriages around them. For all, perhaps a deeper compassion toward those who hurt.

Close the lesson on the note where Jesus' heart rests: high standards and deep grace, together. Send your students home neither lowering God's beautiful design nor wielding it as a weapon, but trusting the Savior who calls us to covenant faithfulness and who restores broken people and broken homes with a grace deeper than our failures.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming a step that fits one's own situation honestly
- Covenant faithfulness, reconciliation, purity, or compassion as fitting responses
- Receiving God's grace afresh where there has been failure
- Holding high standards and deep grace together

Discussion Prompts

- Where is Christ calling you to a more faithful, covenant-shaped way of living?
- What one step fits your own situation this week?
- How does the gospel let you hold God's high design and his deep grace together?