

The Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 6: God's Design for Marriage -- Matthew 5:31-32

Few words in the Sermon on the Mount land with as much weight as these, because few subjects touch as many lives as deeply. Almost everyone reading this passage knows the ache of a broken marriage somewhere close to home, whether their own, their parents', their child's, or a dear friend's. So before we hear a single word of Jesus' teaching, let us settle our hearts in this: the One speaking is not a distant lawgiver but the Lord who wept at a tomb, who welcomed the woman at the well, who came not to break the bruised reed but to heal it. He speaks about marriage because he made it, and because he loves the people it was meant to bless.

In Jesus' day, divorce had become casual and convenient, at least for men. A popular school of thought taught that a man could write his wife a certificate of divorce for almost any reason that displeased him, even something as trivial as a ruined meal. The certificate made it all legal and tidy. A man could discard his wife and feel entirely righteous because he had followed the proper procedure. Jesus refuses to let the paperwork hide the heartbreak. "It was said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce,'" he quotes, and then he speaks the harder, truer word.

Jesus lifts marriage back up to where God set it in the beginning: one man and one woman, joined by God into one flesh, meant to stay joined for life. He treats the marriage bond as something so real and so sacred that it cannot simply be dissolved at will, and he names the grievous exception, sexual immorality, that can break the covenant. He is not piling a new burden on weary people; he is restoring a glorious design that a hard-hearted culture had cheapened. Marriage, he insists, is not a contract to be torn up when it stops being convenient. It is a covenant, made before God, that mirrors his own faithful love.

This is tender ground, and we will walk it gently. Some who study this lesson carry the scars of divorce, their own choices or wounds inflicted on them by someone else. Hear this clearly from the outset: God hates divorce because of what it does to the people he loves, but he does not hate the divorced. The same Lord who calls us to honor his design for marriage is faithful and just to forgive, to cleanse, and to make all things new. As we study, let us hold the standard high without using it as a stone, and let us trust the Savior who restores broken people and broken homes with a grace deeper than our failures.

Group Discussion: In Jesus' day, divorce had become an easy, paperwork-managed convenience, and Jesus confronted that culture by lifting marriage back to God's original design. In what ways does our own culture cheapen marriage and treat it as disposable, and why does it matter that Jesus calls it a covenant rather than a contract?

Personal Reflection: Whatever your own marital story, examine your heart before God. Where have you absorbed the culture's view that commitments last only as long as they are convenient, in marriage or in other relationships, and how might Jesus be calling you to a deeper, more covenant-shaped faithfulness?

Read Matthew 5:31–32

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Reflect on these passages: Matthew 19:3–9, Jesus pointing back to creation and God's design for one-flesh permanence; Genesis 2:18–24, the two becoming one flesh; 1 Corinthians 7:10–16, Paul's instructions to the married and to those whose marriages are broken; Malachi 2:13–16, God's grief over faithlessness in marriage; Ephesians 5:25–33, marriage as a picture of Christ and the church.