

# Deeper Discoveries

## Sermon on the Mount

### Lesson 7: Matthew 5:31–32



#### Literary Design

Jesus' teaching on divorce follows directly on the heels of his teaching on sexual immorality, and that's not a coincidence. Divorce is often the sad outcome of lust and adultery. Some commentators think these two verses are an additional note on the preceding paragraph on adultery, supported by Jesus' shortened introduction: "It has been said" instead of the full "You have heard that it was said." However, there is so much packed into these two verses that they are more than a footnote.

It was a shocking idea to the people of that time and place that someone properly divorced could be guilty of adultery by marrying a second time. Jesus was saying that the divorced woman would still, in reality, be the married wife of the first husband if the husband divorced her for any reason other than unfaithfulness; thus, when she married again, she and the man she married would be committing adultery. Further, the divorced woman would be forced to marry again, because it would be impossible for her to survive otherwise. So when a man divorced his wife, he compelled her to marry another and thus commit adultery or become a prostitute [1]. For both lust and divorce, the actual point Jesus makes is that we must radically embrace marital faithfulness as a sacred commitment before God. Believers cannot control the choices their spouse makes, but for their own part they must choose faithfulness. [2]

[1] Thomas Tehan and David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary of the Sermon on the Mount*, Second Edition (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 74. Edited.

[2] Craig S. Keener, "The Sermon's Ethical Teachings: Living from the Inside Out," *Bible Study Magazine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Faithlife, 2020), 38. Edited.

#### *Context Matters!*

Carefully read the entirety of Deut 24:1–4. While sinful men try to figure out just what "indecent" means as the main issue in order to make divorce as easy as possible, the real warning was the threat to God's people, Israel, who would lose their land inheritance if sin of this type was overlooked and became acceptable. That is no small thing! In fact, that is what happened, and such behavior was one reason Israel was sent into exile (Ezek 22:11, 15). Jesus explains this further in Matt 19:3–11: Marriage between one man and one woman, becoming one flesh in the marriage bond, was always part of God's good design. Deviation from God's good design is, by definition, sinful and rebellious. The sins of individuals spoil society—sin is never a private affair. Those arguing about what was "indecent" had missed the bigger point entirely.

We shortcut God's word for ourselves when we zoom in so far that we miss the big picture. Never read a single verse in isolation.

#### Old Testament Connections and Themes

The Old Testament text Jesus addresses is Deuteronomy 24:1–4, but his targets were the competing interpretations of two rabbinical schools about its meaning at that time.

Rabbi Shammai (50 BC–30 AD) taught that "a man may not put away his wife unless he has found immorality in her," interpreting "something indecent in her" quite narrowly. The competing interpretation from Rabbi Hillel

(110 BC–10 AD) said, “he may divorce her even if she has spoiled a dish for him,” [1] that is, allowing a husband to divorce his wife for almost any reason, including burning his dinner. [3] Hillel seemed to have won the day.

Jesus was asked to judge between these competing interpretations, and he decreed in favor of the rigorous view of Shammai, disallowing any ground of divorce with the exception of adultery, [2] but though Jesus taught a position similar to the school of Shammai, he also taught that divorce was not God’s original plan and is not required [3] when the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus on the same issue of divorce and Scripture (19:3–12).

Jesus continues to show the ugly heart of adultery by quoting the abiding authority of Deut 24:1, “It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife must give her a written notice of divorce.” In 5:32, Jesus appears to contravene the command. Yet, as Jesus says later in Matt 19:3–9, this command, meant to protect the divorced woman, is no excuse for divorce itself. The model given for marriage in Gen 2:24 holds as the biblical model of the OT (see Mal 2:14–15). The rejection of divorce stands on the covenant relationship between God and Israel. That sexual immorality is the only cause for divorce parallels the covenantal break related to Israel’s idolatry (Deut 31:16; Isa 50:1; 57:3–10; Jer 3:1–2, 6–10; Ezek 16:1–58; 23:1–49; Hos 1:1–3:5). [4]

[1] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 522.

[2] William P. Paterson, “MARRIAGE,” in *A Dictionary of the Bible: Dealing with Its Language, Literature, and Contents Including the Biblical Theology*, ed. James Hastings et al. (New York; Edinburgh: Charles Scribner’s Sons; T. & T. Clark, 1911–1912), 3:275.

[3] Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1800.

[4] Michael Daling, “Matthew,” in *Connecting Scripture New Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, Christian Standard Bible (Brentwood, TN: Holman Bible, 2025), 13. Edited.

### Commentary (Don Carson)

Our society, including many professing Christians, has rejected biblical conceptions of both love and marriage. Love has become a mixture of physical desire and vague sentimentality; marriage has become a provisional sexual union to be ended when this pathetic, shrunken love fades away.

How different is the biblical perspective! In God’s Word, marriage and love are for the tough-minded. Marriage is commitment; and, far from backing out when the going gets rough, marriage partners are to sort out their difficulties in the light of Scripture...Love is the determined commitment to seek the other’s good to cherish, shelter, nurture, edify, and show patience with one’s partner. This commitment, worked out because of deep-rooted obedience to God, also brings the emotional and sentimental aspect of love.

Jesus proclaims this high view of marriage when, with one exception, he flatly prohibits divorce. And it is this high view of marriage which likewise underlies Jesus’s forceful remarks on lust (5:27–30) and gives this block of material (5:27–32) its sanity. Marriage is not dirty; sex is not filthy. Both are wonderful gifts from the Creator, but they are prostituted by lust and demeaned by divorce. The Law and the Prophets, by Jesus’s own authority, point to the necessity of absolute purity and must not be trivialized by deceptive arguments which seek to escape that purity. [1]

[1] D. A. Carson, *Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: A Study of Matthew 5–10* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2018), 55–59. Edited.