

Matthew 5:31–32 — Divorce & the Covenant of Faithfulness

This is the third of the six “You have heard... but I tell you” teachings.

The Passage

“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’

But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”

— Matthew 5:31–32 (NKJV)

Marriage is the only human relationship described as:

a. A Covenant, not merely a bond

- Malachi 2:14 explicitly calls marriage “the covenant of your God.”

b. A One-Flesh Union

- Genesis 2:24
- This language is never used for any other relationship—only husband & wife.
- It means: a shared life, shared authority, shared future, shared spiritual identity.

c. A Divine Witness & Participant

- In marriage, God is a third party to the covenant (Mal. 2:14).
- Breaking the marriage covenant is not just against a spouse—it is against the God who witnessed and joined them.

d. A Symbol of God’s Relationship with His People

- OT: God = Husband, Israel = bride.
- NT: Christ = Bridegroom, Church = bride.
- Marriage becomes the only human covenant that mirrors salvation history.

e. A Form of Mutual Possession

- 1 Corinthians 7:3–5
- “The husband’s body is not his own... the wife’s body is not her own...”
- Not ownership → mutual self-offering.

A. Covenant = a sacred, binding union where God is a participant

Malachi 2:14

“She is your wife by covenant.”

B. Marriage = the earthly reflection of God’s faithfulness

- A covenant of presence
- A covenant of care
- A covenant of protection
- A covenant of faithfulness
- A covenant of mutual belonging

C. Marriage is unique among all relationships

Because only marriage:

- creates a new shared identity
- joins two into one flesh
- mirrors heaven-earth union
- carries sacrificial responsibility
- requires mutual bodily belonging (1 Cor 7:3–5)

The Husband’s Responsibilities (according to Torah & Jewish law)

A Jewish husband was bound to three non-negotiable obligations (Exodus 21:10):

1. Food
2. Clothing
3. Marital rights (sexual affection & union)

Failing these could legally justify divorce for the wife.

In addition:

He must love his wife

- Deut. 24:5 — a newly married man must stay home for a year to “bring happiness to his wife.”
- Proverbs 5 — celebrate her beauty, rejoice in her, be faithful.

He must protect her reputation

Public shaming or false accusations were severely punished (Deut. 22).

He must financially secure her

A ketubah (marriage contract) guaranteed support if he died or divorced her.

The Wife's Responsibilities

A Jewish wife was expected to:

Support the household economy

- Food preparation
- Fabric production
- Children's early education
- Managing servants if wealthy

Honor and support her husband

Honour included fidelity, managing the household well, participating in family worship, and shaping the spiritual life of the children.

Guard the home

The wife was seen as the guardian of the household's moral and spiritual center.

4. Sexual Norms Were NOT the Same for Men and Women

This is where things were asymmetrical:

For a wife

- Sexual immorality = adultery
- It threatened the husband's lineage (paternity certainty)
- It was covenant-breaking

For a husband

- He was forbidden from committing adultery with another man's wife
- BUT intercourse with an unmarried woman was not technically adultery in Jewish law unless it violated another covenant

This is a huge cultural point.

Jesus attacks this very asymmetry by:

- Calling lust equally sinful

- Saying remarriage after wrongful divorce makes the man an adulterer
- Leveling the playing field morally and spiritually

What Paul Does Is Radical, Not Redundant

When Paul writes:

- “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church”
- “Wives submit... husbands sacrifice”
- “The husband’s body is not his own; the wife’s body is not her own”

He is not inventing marriage ethics out of thin air.

He is:

- Correcting cultural imbalance
- Equalizing authority
- Restoring mutuality
- Infusing the covenant with Christlike love
- Bringing the one-flesh model to its spiritual fullness

Paul re-humanizes and re-equalizes marriage inside the patriarchal world of his day.

Jesus confronts the misuse of Deuteronomy 24:1–4.

In His day, some rabbis allowed divorce for almost any reason (“even if she burned the meal”).

Rabbis debated acceptable reasons for divorce.

Jesus strips away all loopholes and resets marriage to its covenant intention.

Background: The Misuse of Deuteronomy 24

1. The Pharisees and scribes anchored divorce to Deut. 24:1–4: “If a man finds some uncleanness in his wife...”
2. Two major schools developed:
 - Shammai: “uncleanness” = sexual immorality only.
 - Hillel: “uncleanness” = almost anything, even trivial offenses.
3. The Hillel interpretation became popular — it turned divorce into an escape clause.

4. Jesus is not abolishing Moses; He is correcting the corrupt interpretations and returning marriage to God's original design (as He later explains in Matt. 19).

Jesus protects the vulnerable.

Women in 1st-century Israel were often left destitute after divorce.

By restricting divorce, Jesus:

- protects women
- stops men from "passing them around"
- restores dignity to marriage

This teaching does NOT condemn the divorced — it frees the wounded.

"Many people have carried shame for divorces that were actually the result of covenant-breaking done against them.

Jesus is not condemning them — He is naming the sin for what it is: the violation of the one-flesh covenant by the one who harmed, neglected, or abused."

- "Abandoned spouses are not guilty."
- "Abused spouses did not break the covenant."
- "Those who escaped harm are not condemned by God."
- "Jesus does not bind people to covenant destroyers."

Divorce is never "just paperwork."

The culture treated divorce lightly because a certificate made it legal.

Jesus teaches that legality does not equal righteousness.

Divorce wounds covenant, identity, and community.

Jesus exposes the real issue:

- Divorce is not an administrative act.
- It is the tearing of a covenant.

Why adultery?

- In that culture, a divorced woman almost always remarried to survive.
- A frivolous divorce forced her into a situation where she would be considered "adulterous" according to societal norms — even though she was actually innocent.

Jesus condemns a system that punished the vulnerable while excusing the powerful.

A. Jesus condemns:

- trivial divorces
- selfish divorces
- “any cause” divorces
- legal loopholes to discard a spouse
- divorces rooted in hardness of heart
- divorce-as-power-over-the-vulnerable

B. Jesus defends:

- the abandoned
- the abused
- the betrayed
- the neglected
- the mistreated
- the endangered
- those whose covenant was broken against them

Sexual immorality (porneia) is the only exception Jesus names.

And even then, it is an allowance, not a command.

Reconciliation is still the heart of God, but Jesus acknowledges that betrayal can break covenant in a unique way.

The Exception Clause — “Except for sexual immorality” (porneia)

1. Sexual immorality is unique among sins because it breaks one-flesh union (1 Cor. 6:16–18).
2. Jesus does not command divorce here.
 - He permits it because betrayal destroys trust in a way other sins do not.
3. The exception is given out of mercy, not legalism.

The Warning: Hardness of Heart

- In Matthew 19, Jesus says Moses permitted divorce “because of the hardness of your hearts.”
- Hardness breaks covenant; love restores covenant.

“Sexual immorality” (πορνεία / porneia) never meant only adultery.

In both:

- Hebrew law, and
- Jesus' usage, and
- Second Temple Jewish context,

the word for sexual immorality refers to a category of covenant-breaking behaviors, not a single act.

Porneia = any action that violates the covenantal integrity of the marriage — whether sexual, relational, spiritual, or violent.

This is critical:

Adultery is one expression of porneia, not the definition of it.

In the Old Testament, “sexual sin” often meant treating the covenant wrongfully, not just infidelity.

Examples:

a. Exodus 21:10–11

If a husband:

- deprives
- neglects
- abandons
- fails to provide
- or treats his wife harmfully

→ she is released from the marriage covenant.

“Released” = covenant termination.

This is Torah.

This is not about sexual acts — it's about covenant-infidelity.

b. Deuteronomy 22 & 24

Sexual sin is tied to:

- violation of the wife's dignity
- false accusations
- harm
- exploitation
- degrading treatment

All of which are seen as covenant-breaking behaviors.

None of these are “sex acts,”

yet all are treated as violations of sexual fidelity because they violate the one-flesh covenant.

Jewish law explicitly held that ABUSE breaks the covenant.

This is not modern interpretation — it is ancient.

- The Ketubah (marriage contract) listed husband's obligations:
- food
- clothing
- marital affection
- protection
- household peace

If he violated these—especially through violence or cruelty—the wife had legal right to divorce.

In many Jewish communities, the rabbis ruled:

“A man who strikes his wife causes her to be released.”

Violence was considered a covenant-breaking sin — and yes, it fell under the category of porneia, because porneia is about misusing the marriage covenant, not merely sexuality.

Pornēia includes:

- sexual infidelity
- emotional infidelity
- covenant betrayal
- abandonment
- violence
- dishonoring behavior
- degrading one's spouse
- treating them as property
- any form of exploitation

Because all of these desecrate the one-flesh covenant.

Paul explicitly expands porneia to include harmful, degrading, or exploitative behavior.

1 Corinthians 7:3–5

Mutual bodily belonging is sacrificial, never coercive.

If one spouse exploits the other's body → covenant-breaking.

Ephesians 5

A husband must love his wife “as Christ loves the Church”:

- gentle
- protective

- sacrificial
- nourishing
- cherishing

Paul contrasts this with:

- harshness
- domination
- exploitation
- harm

And calls anything else “works of darkness.”

Harm within the one-flesh union is a form of violating the sacred body of Christ’s own analogy.

Scriptural support that abuse breaks covenant:

- Exodus 21:10–11 — neglect dissolves covenant
- Malachi 2:14 — God witnesses abuse
- Deut 22 — harm equals covenant violation
- Rabbinic tradition — violence = release
- Paul — harshness contradicts Christ

Covenant faithfulness reflects God’s own faithfulness.

This is not about punishing people — it’s about honoring the nature of God:

He keeps covenant, even when we break it.

Christ and the Church — the Model of Marriage

Marriage uniquely mirrors God’s covenant with His people.

No other human relationship is used as the template for:

- God’s relationship to Israel (Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah)
- Christ’s relationship to the Church (Ephesians 5, Revelation 19)

God never says:

- “I am a friend to Israel like David and Jonathan.”
- “I am a Father to Israel like Abraham.”
- “I am a leader to Israel like Moses.”

He says:

“I am your Husband.” (Isaiah 54:5)

“I betrothed you to Me.” (Hosea 2:19–20)

“Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her.” (Eph. 5:25)

Marriage is the only human institution that God uses as a prophetic symbol of His love.

This alone puts marriage in a category nothing else shares.

Marriage is the only relationship God explicitly joins together.

Jesus says:

“What GOD has joined together, let no man separate.”

—Matthew 19:6

This is astonishing:

- God does not “join together” business partners
- or friends
- or parents and children
- or teammates
- or ministry partners
- or tribes or nations

But when two people enter marriage, God says:

“I join you. I unite you. I fuse you.”

Marriage is not simply a human covenant; it is a divine act.

A couple doesn’t “marry themselves” spiritually.

God is the One who binds them.

This gives marriage a sacred ontological reality other relationships simply do not have.

A. Ephesians 5:25–33

Marriage mirrors:

- Christ and the Church
- sacrificial love
- mutual belonging
- nourishment
- cherishing
- gentle leadership
- humble submission (from both)

B. The husband is called to love “as Christ loved the Church”

What does Christ’s love look like?

- sacrificial
- protective
- self-giving
- elevating

- never cruel
- never coercive
- never violent
- covenant-keeping even unto death

C. The covenant with Abraham

Genesis 15

God walks through the pieces alone, meaning:

“If this covenant breaks, I Myself will bear the cost.”

Jesus becomes that cost.

D. Marriage points to this truth:

Covenant love lays itself down, it doesn't tear the other down.

E. Jesus is the faithful husband even when we were unfaithful.

This becomes the living model for how spouses should treat each other.

Marriage is supposed to reflect God's kind of faithfulness —
faithfulness that bears the cost instead of shifting it,
faithfulness that protects rather than discards,
faithfulness that mirrors the God who kept covenant even when we didn't.