

The “Hard Sayings” of Jesus and Divorce: Not Commandments but Goals

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Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, “This is a hard saying; who can understand it?” John 6:60 NKJV

If I had been around to present this article to Henry VIII when he was having his problems, he would have made me Archbishop of Canterbury. I will argue below that Jesus’ teaching on divorce is not, as most Christians have assumed, a new commandment, but is instead a righteous ideal at which we should aim, an ideal defining the nature of marriage as God sees it. I will do this not by a careful study of Jesus’ divorce teaching,¹ but by comparing its nature with the nature of Jesus’ other “hard sayings” that reveal the true meaning of righteousness. I will argue that this divorce teaching is the only “hard saying” churches generally take literally as a command meant to be codified in church policy. These comments will be interspersed with several pages of musings on the nature of the church as the body of Christ, the call to forgiveness, and the relationship between discipline and discipling.

Jesus tells us He didn’t come to abolish the law (Matt 5:17). Instead, He raises the stakes, revealing the spiritual dimension of the law. He shows us righteousness as God sees it, then dares us to stay in the game. Murder? Jesus says being angry with your own brother is like murder in God’s eyes (vs. 21–22). Adultery? Jesus says if you even look at a woman with lust in your heart, you’ve committed adultery, so far as God is concerned (vs. 27–28). Divorce? Only for adultery (vs. 31–32). Taking God’s name in vain? Using any oaths at all breaks that commandment (vs. 33–37). Lawsuits? Give your accuser the coat off your back as well as anything else he asks for (v. 40). Love your neighbor? Love your enemy (v. 44)! Keep the commandments? Jesus says, be

¹ I have looked at this teaching in “1 Corinthians 7:10–16: Divorce of the Unbeliever or Reconciliation with the Unfaithful,” *JATS*, 10/1-2 (1999): 41–62.

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perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (v. 48). Anxious about your future? Don't worry about it—God will provide (Matt 6:25; John 6:27). Honor your father and mother? Leave your parents and follow Jesus or you're not worthy of him (Matt 10:38). Charity? Sell what you have and give to the poor (Matt 19:21). Don't worship or bow down to idols? Jesus says don't even worship men by considering them your spiritual masters, calling them rabbi or father (Matt 23:8–11).

It's interesting that all churches take some of these “hard sayings”² more literally than others. Jesus' statements on divorce are dissected with care and followed to the letter in many denominations. Several churches forbid oaths in court on the basis of what Jesus says, but those that don't look askance at such literalism. A few, partly on the basis of Jesus' words, have self-insurance schemes where a congregation helps a family struck by disaster, but most affluent Christians are sufficiently anxious about their future that they have house insurance, life insurance, and pension funds. Many churches sue people who infringe on the church's rights or steal from the church, despite the words of Jesus and Paul (1 Cor 6:7). Many churches allow personal feuds between members to continue for years. In many churches gossip is the primary social activity. Few churches urge members to sell all their possessions and give to the poor. Many churches don't call their pastors “Father” or “Rabbi,” but regard their pastors' interpretation of the Bible as God-revealed, no matter how bizarre it may be. Yet since Jesus makes all these statements with the same seriousness—and in many cases at the same time to the same audience—logic and consistency demands that we give them all similar emphasis, whatever that emphasis might be. It seems unsound to emphasize some while ignoring others.

Exaggeration is one of Jesus' favorite rhetorical techniques, but these hard sayings are not exaggerations.³ Rather, Jesus is showing self-satisfied people

² F. F. Bruce's book *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, published in 1983, is now available in the useful omnibus edition *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, by Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Brauch (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1996). While not a technical term, the phrase “hard sayings” is often used to refer either to texts that, “because of differences in culture and time, are hard to understand without having their social and historical backgrounds explained,” or texts “that are all too easily understood but that challenge the ways we think and act” (publisher's preface, 9–10).

³ Robert H. Stein, in his *Difficult Sayings in the Gospels: Jesus' Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), distinguishes between many types of exaggeration. An interesting example of exaggeration is Matt 22:21, where Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's” (NIV). We tend to assume Jesus means we should pay our taxes, but Jesus is facing a hostile audience of Pharisees who want to entrap him by getting him to admit that Jews should pay taxes to Caesar. Thus, He refuses to give a yes or no answer to their question about whether Jews should pay taxes to Caesar, because either answer would anger one group or another. Instead He asks whose portrait and inscription is on the denarius. [According to the *ISBE* entry on “Money,” “The ‘coin’ (Gk. *Denarion*) used for tribute and requested by Jesus when the Pharisees asked him whether paying tribute to Caesar was lawful (Mt. 22:19 par.) would have been the silver denarius of the succeeding emperor, Tiberius (14–37). This coin displays a portrait of Tiberius on

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the difference between keeping the commandments and being truly godly, truly good. This spells the end of complacency for us. Never again can we relax and think we're good enough to face God in His holiness without a Savior to stand as our advocate, even though the Father himself loves us (John 16:27). Never again can we imagine that in ourselves we can please God or do things that will impress him.⁴

There have been stages in my Christian experience when I've found these hard sayings radical, inspiring, and exciting. Trying to live up to Christ's example as His disciple can be exhilarating when it leads to transformation, as when lifting weights leads to bulging muscles. It is true that we are called to submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit and let the Spirit make us more Christ-like. At other times, though, I've found these sayings daunting, even depressing. How can I ever be what Christ asks me to be?

Gradually, however, I've reached a conclusion. In these hard sayings, Jesus reveals the truth. But He reveals this truth not because He thinks we can reach this level of holiness in our present sinful flesh, but to convince us we need a savior. He reveals perfection, giving His followers a target at which to aim, but without expecting many bull's-eyes. He reveals what is expected of a righteous person who wants to deserve the prize, but He knows we will fail to reach those expectations. To the extent we become like Jesus, we bring God glory, but we keep on falling short.

However, knowing that because of sin we can't do it ourselves, Jesus does it for us. And He teaches us, both through His own words and through those of His disciples who write the New Testament, that while only He is capable of being the champion who defeats sin and death, everyone willing to follow him can be a part of His championship team and so share His glory, even though they can't do flawlessly what He does.

Some Christians see the law of God as an intolerable burden, rather than as a delight (Ps 1:2; Rom 7:22). Yet when Jesus urges the rich young ruler to keep the commandments, He replies, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" (Matt 19:20). Keeping the ten commandments is not easy, but as they were originally given, it is not all that difficult. What is impossible is meeting the standards Jesus raises for us. That's partly His intention. He wants us to trust in Him, even as we keep striving to reach the goal He sets for us. (We

the obverse and a seated female figure on the reverse."] Essentially, Jesus says, "If a denarius has the name or inscription of Caesar on it, it must belong to Caesar, so give Caesar all your coins that bear his name or inscription." While Jesus might be making a profound comment on the vanity of worldly wealth and the need to devote ourselves to God, it seems more likely that He is using hyperbole to avoid being trapped and to confound his listeners, who are not about to give all their denarii to Caesar.

⁴ Bear in mind that while Jesus reveals in these texts what it means to truly keep only these few laws, we should follow his example and extend this to every aspect of life. Every day, in every way, we all fall short of the glory of God, but we are called to aim at it.

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must always remember that these standards are not arbitrary, but a revelation of true righteousness.)

Many believe they can relax now that they are no longer under the law, but have the law as their servant. They only have to follow Jesus’ “new” commandments, loving God with all their hearts and loving their neighbors as themselves. But can they really imagine it is easier to love their neighbors as themselves than to not covet, or easier to love God with all their hearts than to not worship idols or take His name in vain? Astonishing!

Jesus reveals what the rich young ruler sensed: the ten commandments are not God’s highest desire for us, but a bare minimum needed to educate and govern a nation of ex-slaves. Jesus says, “Look higher!”

Consider Isa 55:8–9, where Isaiah writes,

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And my thoughts than your thoughts.”

David Dorsey has suggested that scholars are wrong to see this as a typical king’s boast. In context, it is instead God encouraging His people to give up their own ways and adopt His ways, to “Come to the waters,” to “Come, buy and eat” (v. 1), to come up higher.⁵ Jesus, in His ministry, shows us what God would like us to be and urges us toward a perfection that far transcends the commandments (while building on them).

Yet though pressing on toward the prize (Phil 3:14), still Paul cries out, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24). He wants to be a victor, but his flesh is weak; it doesn’t obey him and lift him over the hurdles consistently. His victory is sure, though, “through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (v. 25), his champion and the head of his team.

Implications for Church Discipline

We are called to be perfect (Matt 5:48), even though we are certain to fall short of that goal.⁶ That is the reason for these hard sayings—showing us what perfection is. Any church claiming to follow Christ needs to continually hold this high calling (Phil 3:14) before the people of God and train them to reach this mark. But in most cases we are well aware that we need to be cautious about basing church discipline on whether or not members reach this highest mark. *Exclusion from the body of Christ as discipline should be reserved for those who don’t care, those who scoff at the church, those whose consistent lack of re-*

⁵ Personal conversation, Evangelical School of Theology, 12 June 2001.

⁶ Though that call is not, of course, an example of Jesus raising the bar to a height over which we cannot leap, because He is merely echoing God’s plea in Lev 11:44–45, not calling for a higher standard. There is no higher standard.

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morse for sin shows they may not be a spiritual part of the body of Christ, in any case. Even these people, however, when they repent and confess, must be welcomed home (cf. 1 Cor 5:1–5, 11 and 2 Cor 2:5–11).

But there are other kinds of discipline available than merely expelling people or removing them from church office. *A different approach is needed for those who, like the apostle Paul, sin knowingly, but helplessly, addictively, not wanting to, because of “this body of death” which makes them do what their spirit doesn’t want to do (Rom 7:23–24).⁷ We need to think of such discipline not as punishment but as **discipling**. The elders of the church might “discipline” erring members by arranging for more victorious members to take errant ones under their wings, spending time with them, guiding them, fostering their growth in Christ.*

Suspending church members for doing what they really don’t want to do, even though they do it deliberately, does not help them. Instead, we are called to practice “the ministry of reconciliation,” called to share with the fallen ones “the message of reconciliation,” which is, “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:18–21 NIV). That’s good news! Christ has been righteous for us, won the battle for us, so now all of us who have joined His team share His righteousness. And as we ourselves are called to minister that reconciliation, it is through our love, our compassion, forgiveness, solicitude, inclusion, and gentle guidance that the fallen are lifted up again. If we fail to represent Jesus in this way to the fallen ones as Jesus represents us before the Father, then once again we ourselves fall short of God’s glory, proving we are no better at heart than those we scorn.

Jesus says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, “I repent,” forgive him” (Luke 17:3–4).⁸ Note two things. First, Jesus is speaking to the disciples (v. 1), the seed that will grow to become the church. Therefore He is speaking not just to individuals, but to the church as a whole. Second, we have to be careful about how we judge whether or not a person is truly repentant. If my brother does the same mean thing to me seven times in a day and each time repents and asks forgiveness, I may be tempted to say “You’re not really sorry or you wouldn’t keep doing that,” and refuse to forgive him. *But Jesus’ words suggest that we are not called to determine the quality of that repentance. Our work is to forgive the repentant. Once again, please note: the role of the church toward the repentant is to forgive them and lift them up; not to punish them, but to lovingly train them in righteousness. We seem to have*

⁷ I believe this “helpless” sinning differs from the “rebellious” sinning in the Torah, for which one could be “cut off” from Israel, even though some of these “helpless” sins may have been punishable by death in the Israelite theocracy.

⁸ This too is, of course, one of Jesus’ hard sayings. Both as individuals and as the body of Christ, we continually fall short of this mark, yet we are called to aim at it.

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determined that there are some sins that cannot be forgiven, or some sins that must always result in punishment, even if the sinner is repentant. This is in opposition to the teaching of Jesus.

We are not called to save ourselves. The laws of the Old Testament, I think, were not all that hard for ancient agriculturalists to keep. God designed the relationship to provide security and predictability. Where the Canaanite deities were arbitrary and demanding, the God of Israel was consistent and merciful. Essentially He asked His people to trust in His consistency and mercy and walk in His ways. It was not only possible for the average person to keep the law and be at peace with God as the feasts and seasons passed, but so easy and expected that those who refused to repent and return to God when they erred were considered rebellious, refusing pardon, and cut off from God’s people.⁹ (Remember that Paul’s experience of those laws was colored by the grinding weight of the restrictive laws added in the inter-testamental period, which the average Jew could not keep perfectly.¹⁰) Jesus raises the crossbar from the level of the Mosaic law to the level of God’s holiness. Then, having dashed everyone’s hope of saving themselves, He becomes their savior by joining their team and breaking all records, having in himself the righteousness of God they cannot themselves attain.¹¹

We need to be the church that points to heaven but ministers to humanity. In doing that we will be like Jesus. There is a necessary tension between the church’s call to perfection and its call to kneel down and embrace the fallen. That tension needs to be visible in our tender care for sinners. Again, we must point to the peaks while ministering in the valleys. David writes, of God, “he remembers how we are formed; he knows that we are dust” (Ps 103:14 NIV). If God remembers we are dust, can we honestly believe Jesus expects us to perform as if we were not? If God remembers we are dust, can we ourselves be perfect if we refuse to stoop to lift the alcoholic in our church who has fallen for the hundredth time? What a paradox that God remembers we are dust, but the church acts as if we were spirit, beyond temptation and capable of true perfection in ourselves.¹²

⁹ Thus the psalmist could truthfully write, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long” (Ps 119:97 NIV). We shouldn’t imagine that most people found the law terrifying. Many may have found it a deep comfort.

¹⁰ Evidence of this can be found on any page of the *Mishnah*, much of which preserves religious practice from Paul’s day.

¹¹ Paul’s understanding is that Jesus joins Israel by birth as an Israelite, limits true Israel to the faithful, invites the whole world to be grafted into Abraham through Him, and looks forward to those Israelites pruned off (because they were not producing fruit or were spiritually dead) being grafted back in as soon as they are willing (Rom 11:11–24).

¹² I am not denying that being born again always results in the fruits of the Spirit ripening in our lives, nor that the Holy Spirit can give us victory over sins that have plagued us for years. However, Paul serves as evidence that the best of us still struggle. True, God calls us *toward* victory over sin, but inevitably our victory must be in our champion, Jesus, who did what we have failed to do.

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Even Paul claims, “with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin” (Rom 7:25). Some say Paul is remembering his situation before his conversion, but I doubt it. I think he has discovered that though regenerated and adopted as a son of God, he is still prey to temptation and still guilty of giving in to it, even though he knows doing so is sin. Can we expect more of ourselves? More important, can we expect more of the spiritually wounded and spiritually handicapped brothers and sisters around us? *Do we imagine it is **clean** feet Jesus asks us to wash?*

We sometimes act as though everyone in the church has been born again. We also act as though those who have been born again cannot harden their hearts. Jesus says divorce was given to the Israelites because of their hardness of heart (Mark 10:5), which is to say, because they refused to submit completely to God’s will. Are our hearts so much softer than theirs? If so, then why does the author of Hebrews tell us hardness continues in the church “today” (Heb 3:8, 15; 4:7)? If so, why do we still find the sins of Israel in our own congregations and in our own hearts? If some hearts remain hard in today’s church, then we should assume that divorce is also, alas, given to these people, as well. Would that our hearts were soft.

In our church government, we must point to the heights of God’s plan for us but unceasingly lift up those who fall. What might this mean in practice? Let’s look at several common problems in our churches and how seeing Jesus as our champion might affect our way of dealing with them.

Inconsistent Applications of the Hard Sayings of Jesus

My purpose in this essay is to show that we readily assume that most of the hard sayings of Jesus are not to be taken as new commandments, but as a revelation of what true holiness is in God’s eyes and an encouragement for us to aim at being holy as God is holy, yet many churches see Jesus’ divorce teaching in the same context as a commandment. In support of this, it would be useful to look at some of these hard sayings and what we do with them.

First, what about marriage and divorce? *We must hold up happy, submitted, and committed marriage as God’s ideal and the goal at which we must aim. But we should admit there are those in the church with hard hearts. We should do what we can to soften those hearts. We should teach that in God’s eyes divorce is never a good or even acceptable thing but a spiritual failure, even though it may end an abusive relationship. We should teach that in God’s eyes remarriage is like adultery. However, we should also teach that a merely physical cohabitation of man and wife without the spiritual, mental, and physical oneness intended by the words “one flesh”¹³ is also essentially adultery, because like*

¹³ In Matt 19:4–5 (NKJV), Jesus says, speaking to the Pharisees, “‘Haven’t you read . . . that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’” Actually, they had surely read these words, or similar words, but neither

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*adultery it is unfaithfulness to the marriage oath and falls short of God’s ideal.*¹⁴ I suggest that to grit one’s teeth and remain in this condition of unfaithfulness is in itself sinful.¹⁵ *The unfaithfulness must end. It may be that in some cases divorce may bring an end to this sinful condition, though if the hardness of heart can be melted, the better solution is to bring both spouses to conversion.*¹⁶

the Hebrew nor the Greek OT attributes them to the Creator (though perhaps some Jewish commentary of the time of Jesus attributes the words to God). They are instead authorial inserts in the creation story, added by Moses to explain how the story has affected mankind. Genesis 2:24 should be translated, “This is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united with his wife and they become one flesh.” The verse is not saying a man does this because God commanded it or because God performed the first marriage ceremony. It is saying, rather, that a man seeks to become one flesh with his wife because he feels he is missing some of his flesh, and he seeks to replace what has been taken from him. (The direct antecedent to “This is why” is the forming of Eve from a piece taken from Adam, not God saying man shouldn’t be alone.) This is a folk definition, much like the possibly fanciful folk etymologies occasionally given for the names of people and places in Genesis. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., Professor of Old Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, writes of this verse, in his book *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), “The popular view that takes the imperfect as obligatory (“therefore a man should leave his father and his mother”) has no exegetical basis and is unwarranted” (91, n. 24). Most translations word v. 5 in such a way that it seems like Jesus is saying that God said “Therefore . . .” Actually, the words in Greek are *kai eipen*, “and he said.” The New Living Translation correctly separates vs. 4 and 5 into two sentences (the first a question, the second not), making it clear that the “And he said” beginning v. 5 means “And Jesus said.” The expression occurs many times in the gospels. Thus, Jesus is not revealing that God commanded that “Therefore . . .” a man and woman should become one flesh, but simply quoting Genesis. The English translations may say “Therefore” rather than “This is why,” but we don’t know exactly what Jesus said. If He was quoting the text in Hebrew, then “This is why” would be the best translation into English of those words. The translator’s note for Gen 2:24 in the New English Translation (www.netbible.com) says the statement is “an editorial comment, not an extension of the quotation. The statement is describing what typically happens, not what will or should happen. It is saying, ‘This is why we do things the way we do.’ It links a contemporary (with the narrator) practice with the historical event being narrated. The historical event narrated in v. 23 provides the basis for the contemporary practice described in v. 24. That is why the imperfect verb forms are translated with the present tense rather than future.”

¹⁴ The verb *māʿal*, meaning to “behave or act contrary to one’s duty; be unfaithful,” is most often used for unfaithfulness to God, as in Lev 5:16, but it can also mean unfaithfulness to one’s husband, as in Num 5:12. The latter text deals with the procedure for testing whether a wife has been sexually unfaithful. Of course, when we are unfaithful to God, any sexual sense of the word is no more than metaphorical. This suggests that it is inadequate for us to see the marital unfaithfulness that constitutes grounds for divorce as only sexual unfaithfulness. Any disloyalty to the vow of spiritual, physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual fidelity constitutes marital unfaithfulness. To say this is to do no more than Jesus does, seeking the spiritual completion rather than the letter of the law. See Robin Wakely’s article on the word in *NIDOTTE*: 2:1020–1025.

¹⁵ “So, as the Holy Spirit says: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, . . .’” (Heb 3:7–8 NIV).

¹⁶ A pastor recently came to me to ask if he could divorce his wife. He told me that long ago he broke off his courtship with the woman he loved in order to marry a woman he thought would be able to survive living with his very trying mother (a widow). As he put it, “I wanted an orange, but I married an apple. I still want an orange.” This pastor’s wife is considered a paragon of wifely virtue by his congregation. But he never tells his wife he loves her. He never thanks her for her work on his

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Divorce is *never* the first sin in any marriage. Thus, while to divorce is sin, to live together in the condition that makes people wish for divorce is also sin. The ideal solution for a husband and wife is for them to cease from sinning by reconciling and returning to faithfulness to the oath of marriage God considers holy. We can never counsel couples that divorce is acceptable in God's sight. However, after pointing to the high calling of God, we should remind those suffering in marriage or recently divorced that God forgives sin if we repent. Instead of pushing away those who divorce through a period of punishment, we should struggle to heal their anger and bitterness and comfort them. We should try to keep them coming to church and offer them God's (and our own and our church's) love and forgiveness and gradually help the Holy Spirit soften their hearts.¹⁷ We should shelter the suffering children and serve as their surrogate fathers and mothers. Almost inevitably, their parents' failure will leave these children among the "walking wounded." If it is "better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor 7:9), then we should ask God to forgive the sin of a remarriage that is adulterous by God's standards, just as He has forgiven the sin of unfaithfulness to the marriage vow which is adulterous by His standards. Then we must do what we can to make the new marriage a successful one.

Remember, it is not the law that makes remarriage adultery, but Jesus raising the crossbar of the high jump by revealing how divorce and remarriage seem in God's eyes. Here, too, we need to count on Jesus as our faithful champion. Even though the woman He married was His church, He has always been faithful to her. We need to remember that Jesus did not mean, here, to abolish the law restricting divorce (Matt 5:17-18),¹⁸ but to reveal the meaning of true holi-

behalf. He never thanks her for the tasty supper. He never hugs her or prays with her. They haven't had sex in years. He even refuses to perform weddings because his own marriage is so unfulfilling. "My friend," I told him, "perhaps you have never committed physical adultery, but you have been unfaithful to your promise to love and honor your wife throughout your life. You have broken your contract with her. God called for you to be one flesh, but you want nothing to do with her. It seems to me that you are living in a state of constant sin. You are guilty of emotional abuse. I believe what you are doing is just as much a mockery of God's intentions as keeping a mistress or visiting prostitutes." My prescription was that he must never leave the house without hugging his wife and telling her he loves her. Whenever he notices she has done something around the house, he must thank her. He must apologize for making her life a misery. And he must take her to a Marriage Encounter weekend and do his best to rejuvenate the romance in his life. I don't know if he has taken my advice.

¹⁷ Very often divorce signals that at least one partner has not been truly converted. It is troubling that so many baptized church members have not been converted. On the other hand, what better place for them to be than in the church?

¹⁸ While many commentators have seen Deut 24:1-4 as limiting the grounds for divorce to a husband finding "something indecent" in his wife (this was a lesser offence than adultery, which was punished by death), I think the verses' structure reveals that the purpose of the passage is to prohibit a man's being remarried to the "indecent" woman if she has married another man after the divorce. Thus, divorce in Israelite culture is tacitly allowed though not approved, except for this exception, which is neither allowed nor approved. I think the idea behind this remarriage being an abomination is that if she is known to be indecent, a man would only want her back for indecent purposes, which

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ness in marriage. Thus, perhaps we should be careful about making a spiritual ideal a matter of church policy. After all, we do not require all members to sell what they have and give to the poor, yet Jesus commands that, too.¹⁹

Second, what about lust? Lust may be like adultery in God’s eyes, but in worldly terms the pain caused by physical adultery can be far worse. Instead of shunning those who lust, we need to pray for them, forgive them (time after time) as God does, and help them. Both scriptural example and the experience of fallen pastors we have known or heard of agree that the repentant adulterer is forgiven by God and given work in God’s vineyard, even if perhaps restricted to a less dangerous part of the vineyard. If this is so, then is the church not also called to forgive and forgive again?

If a pastor commits adultery, it is in part, I believe, the responsibility of the congregation that allowed him to be in a situation where an act of adultery could occur. Did you let him counsel people behind closed doors? Did you let him go by himself on pastoral visits? Did you fail to offer him a group to which he could be accountable without his ordination and livelihood being threatened when he confessed his failures? Did you somehow assume he was not open to

would be an abomination. Thus, I think Rabbi Hillel was essentially right in thinking the law allows divorce for virtually any reason, even though I think he was wrong to see the “indecent thing” as standing for that reason. Rabbi Shammai came closer to defining the “indecent thing” correctly. (Mishnah, *m. Gittin* 9:10, in Jacob Neusner’s translation, reads: A. The House of Shammai say, “A man should divorce his wife only because he has found grounds for it in unchastity, / B. “since it is said, *Because he has found in her indecency in anything.*” / C. And the House of Hillel say, “Even if she spoiled his dish, / D. “since it is said, *Because he has found in her indecency in anything.*” / E. R. Aqiba says, “Even if he found someone prettier than she, / F. “since it is said, *And it shall be if she find no favor in his eyes* (Dt. 24:1).”) We should also bear in mind how customs have changed since the time of Moses. No woman in any modern western bathing suit—no matter how modest we might consider it today—would be considered decent in Moses’ day. Indeed, the dress of the average grandmother in church today would be thought indecent in Moses’ day. For a thorough study, see Roy Gane, “Old Testament Principles Relating to Divorce and Remarriage,” *JATS*, 12/2 (Autumn 2001).

¹⁹ Some would say this command was only for the rich young ruler. Peter said he’d “left all” (Luke 18:28), but he still had a boat and a home in Capernaum. However, Jesus certainly emphasizes the danger of wealth and seeking after it (Luke 16:13, 25; Mark 10:25). Ron du Preez has written convincingly against polygamy, pointing out that God never commanded or even sanctioned it, even though he didn’t outlaw it. There seem to be no examples of happy, contented polygamy in the Bible—not even God’s marriage to Oholah and Oholibah in Ezekiel 23. He has also referred to divorce and remarriage as “serial polygamy.” See his *Polygamy in the Bible*, Berrien Springs, Mich: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1993, and his “The God-Given Marital Mandate: Monogamous, Heterosexual, Intrafaith,” *JATS*, 10/1–2 (Spring–Autumn 1999): 23–40. Certainly fidelity and monogamy were as much the creation ideal in Moses’ day as in our own, yet God allowed what He hated (Mal 2:16). Experiential evidence, based on divorced people we know who are now submitted to his will, suggests that God continues to grudgingly tolerate the divorce He hates, even though it hurts him, because He knows our hearts are hard. Remember, even though He says “I hate divorce,” this does not mean divorce is the only sin He hates.

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temptation? There is a reason why Jesus sent out His disciples in pairs.²⁰ If a pastor is guilty even of child abuse and repents, remove the temptation and put the man to work. There is a great need for chaplains in hospices, retirement centers, and armed forces. We act as if a person tempted by one sin in particular must be guilty of all sins. We assume that if he is weak in one place, he must be weak in all places. We assume that if a pastor falls in one way he has nothing more to offer the church in any way. This is like thinking a man with a shriveled hand must also have a shriveled mind. Instead, we need to help a pastor guard his weak point so he can be strong everywhere else. Perhaps if church members ceased their idolatry, stopped worshiping their pastors and accepted them as humans, they could better accept and support those who need their help so they can in turn help others. In actual fact, pastors who don't face temptation themselves can't really understand what we're going through, but if they face it and are human, we must expect them to sometimes fall (see Heb 2:18, 4:15).

Third, what about the call to love our neighbors? We talk about the need for *agape* love, but unconditional love for enemies or even friends doesn't come easily—if ever. We must continue to talk about love, but we should also train the people of God to tolerate those who are different and those who hurt them, to see them as people in need of salvation, or indeed as brothers and sisters in Christ, if that is the case. However often we try to leap over the crossbar of love, we nearly always fall short of the mark. Until we can consistently make that leap, we will need a champion, a savior. That is to say, we will *always* need a champion on this earth. Whenever we respond to the fall of a brother or sister in Christ by pointing rather than comforting, we fall short of the mark. If we cringe at a silly hat in church, or a t-shirt instead of a tie, or a praise song instead of a great hymn, or a quavering voice singing a solo, or even if we sneer at someone who cringes at those things, we have not loved. Yes, we must teach the need to love. But we must forgive those who fail to love, just as we must love the ones they themselves fail to love. Do you know someone who avoids you because he is a racist? Don't call him a racist and shun him, but go to him and love him and teach him to love you. If you can't, then realize that you *both* need a champion to do what you can't do.

Fourth, what about stewardship, what we owe to the government, to God, to those in need, and even to God's creation groaning for relief (Rom 8:22)? Not

²⁰ Some would say it is not the place of the members to protect their pastor in this way, but if the pastor is also a part of the body of Christ, and not independent and above that body, then the pastor too is a part of the body to be cherished and protected. I think it would be quite appropriate for the elders or the church board to insist that the pastor is never to be alone with a woman who is not his wife, whether in his office or during a pastoral visit. There are a number of other things a board could do to protect the pastor, as well. The most exposed parts of the body are most in need of protection. I once heard Chuck Swindoll say that in his decades of ministry, he had never been alone with a woman not his wife, not even in a car. He said his ministry was given to him by God—it was too precious for him to jeopardize it by being in a position where someone could think evil of him. Would that more pastors realized their danger.

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everyone is plagued by lust, or anger, or a bad marriage, but we all have to pay taxes and tithe. Is that why almost none of us argue that the church should discipline not only those who divorce, but those who don't live in poverty or at least give sacrificially? Scholars have provided sound arguments to show that Jesus doesn't mean for us to give away all our possessions, but only to be generous to those in need and to God and Caesar. Many church members who would vote to expel from the church someone who has committed a sexual sin are quite comfortable with their own cheating on taxes, failure to pay an honest tithe, or creatively redefining where to pay their tithe and how much to pay.²¹ Here, instead of teaching as a requirement a saying meant to reveal God's highest desires for us, as we do with divorce or adultery, we fail to insist on even the biblical minimum. Thus we reveal the inconsistency with which we treat the hard sayings of Jesus.

Fifth, what about murder? Few are disciplined for having a bad temper. Few are warned to stop the gossip that is not only the bearing of false witness, but the reason for a good deal of anger. I know people in churches who won't talk to each other. Are they thus guilty of murder, yet unrebuked? Here is another example of a sin where we don't often point to God's highest desires for us. Is it because nearly all of us harbor anger in our hearts?

Sixth, Jesus commands us, “[D]o not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. . . . Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself” (Matt 6:25, 34 NIV). Is worry forbidden by Old Testament law? Yes, in a way. The rebellion of the Israelites in the desert—from the Red Sea, to the bitter water of Mara, to the golden calf episode, to the response to the spies who scouted out Canaan, and on—can be traced to their worry, their hard hearts and lack of faith. The Old Testament equivalent of “Do not worry” is “do not be afraid,” as in Deut 1:21 or Gen 15:1. These words may not be specific laws, but nevertheless God often uses the phrase. “Do not worry” is as much Christ's command to us as any of the others, but what church disciplines members for worry? My own mother is devoted to God but admits that she's a “worry wart,” and when my children are out on some school or church activity, I pray frequently for their safety, almost as if I don't believe God will care for them if I don't keep asking. Jesus says those who worry have “little faith” (v. 30). In that case, shouldn't we think twice before choosing elders or pastors who worry? I have house insurance, car insurance, life insurance, disability insurance, a pension fund, and a couple weeks' salary set aside “for a rainy day.” Is this a sign that I am a worrier, a man of little faith? My wife keeps a careful budget, setting aside funds in various accounts for taxes, car repairs, house repairs, tuition, so when the bills arrive we won't panic. Even the church I attend is insured for a variety of catastrophes that will proba-

²¹ It is certainly tempting to define one's increase as “after taxes.” I tithe my gross income, but more than forty percent of that gross goes to various taxes.

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bly never occur. I write this not to suggest that we should expel church members who worry, but to show we are far from responding consistently to Christ's call for the highest level of holiness in His followers.

The following table reveals in a graphic way the seriousness we accord to Jesus' apparent commands.

Jesus' Hard Sayings:	Treated as a Goal	Treated as a Command
Lust as Adultery	X	
Anger as Murder	X	
Love of Enemies	X	
False Witness/Gossip	X	
Stewardship	X	
Worry as Lack of Faith	X	
Idolizing Pastor (Rabbi/Father)	X	
Selling All and Giving	X	
Swearing and Oaths	X	
Lawsuits in Church	X	
Be Perfect Like the Father	X	
Leave All and Follow Christ	X	
No Treasures on Earth	X	
Don't Be Judgmental	X	
Divorce and Remarriage		X

In every case but one we understand that Jesus is pointing us to an ideal God wants us to attain. Only in the case of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage do we treat Jesus' words as law and church policy. I am very happily married, and I think divorce is a tragedy. However, I think Christian churches need to reconsider whether their policies regarding divorce and remarriage are consistent with their policies regarding these other sins against God's goals for us. Even though these policies have been Christian traditions for centuries, I don't think they are biblically sound.

Conclusion

Yes, the body of Christ has been quite inconsistent in how it treats the hard sayings of Jesus. In some areas we require members to meet the highest mark set by Jesus when He revealed what perfection is in God's eyes. In others we excuse members from meeting even the much lower requirements of the Old Testament.

The consistent approach is to teach that in all of these hard sayings, Jesus is presenting the ultimate, the mark He himself reaches as our champion and wants us to aim at, not the mark we must require of the church. We will all fall short, daily, but so long as we remain on the championship team, God's highest vision

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of holiness is not where we ourselves must be in order to be saved, but where our champion has already been, making us "more than conquerors" (Rom 8:37) if we are willing to be on His team.

When we understand this, we will be in a better position to support those who walk with a spiritual limp, helping them walk straight and tall. We will be more eager to forgive those who hurt us by being what they don't want to be, but can't help being. We will be better prepared to encourage those who have fallen or feel their sense of balance slipping away. We will be better able to nourish those who are hungry for the message that they are loved and forgiven, that their Father wants them to come home to the banquet already prepared for them. As we learn to accept the weaknesses of others and make use of what strengths they have, we will also find that others learn to help us with our own failings. Then, together, arm in arm, we can cheer the champion who has done great things and invited us all to join His championship team and look forward to the celebration to come.

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