

The Divorce Sayings

In the Gospels and Pauline Writings

Without discussing immediately the correctness or incorrectness of these interpretations, it may be profitable to consider the danger of approaching the Scriptures with preconceived ideas on what a text can or cannot say. Regardless of which interpretation is correct, it is frightening that the meaning of the text no longer serves as a final authority. **On the contrary, it is the present theology that predetermines what the text means and that serves as a final authority!**¹ (Emphasis mine—bold)

The “divorce sayings” in the Synoptic Gospels and the teachings of Paul are interpreted with a diversity of explanations.² Each interpreter assumes that his or her clarifications of the divorce sayings are God given. There is no room for disagreement once a pronouncement is made. A perusal of the various religious journals reveals that the most able and accomplished preachers differ widely in their explanations of the “bill of divorcement” statements. We differ widely in our understanding of the subject of divorce and remarriage. We have allowed our discernment about the termination of a marriage to fracture the fellowship of believers. We make no room for differences. We must agree with certain or convinced interpreters or suffer the consequences.

We struggle daily over how we are to interpret the divorce remarks when confronted with mitigating situations surrounding depraved behavior or circumstances, which extenuating circumstances often alter our station in life. For example, have we ever considered the predicament of someone whose spouse has committed murder? How should we react to physical abuse by one’s spouse? Does God demand that one (the spouse) must stay married to his or her spouse who is confined to prison for the rest of his or her life because of some degenerate action committed by the spouse imprisoned? Does God command us to live with someone who is “hell” on earth? If someone is guilty of murder, not sexual immorality, is the

¹Robert H. Stein, *Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 95.

²This chapter is found in my book, *Old Texts through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 150-188. My next study will examine the various aspects of divorce focused on the study of Graded Absolutism as found in the Scriptures, which study examines the concept of **biblical** situational ethics, not **atheistic** situational ethics. I have updated some information in this study on divorce of certain individuals mentioned in this essay.

other partner committed to the murderer for the rest of his or her life? We do not always know what course of action to pursue when we confront surroundings beyond our control.

Since divorce and remarriage are prevalent in every society, as it was also in Jesus' civilization, **it is incumbent upon us to seek answers from principles set forth in Holy Scripture in trying to ferret out the intricate problems that we face daily concerning the dilemma of divorce and remarriage.** In pursuit of correct answers about how to react in all surroundings, we soon discover that there are no "pat" answers. **This research pursues two avenues of thought to cope with the problem of divorce and remarriage: (1) exaggeration in the divorce sayings, and (2) the principle of mercy over law.**

EXAGGERATION

Divorce is not always obtained on the basis of "sexual immorality." Does this lack of physical adultery always violate the divorce sayings in the Synoptic Gospels and Pauline writings? Are there any valid reasons for divorce other than "fornication"? Did Jesus teach that there are no *exemptions* to the marriage bond other than physical "fornication" or "adultery"? When Matthew, Mark, and Luke recorded the divorce sayings, did they consider the pronouncements of Jesus a dissertation or exhaustive exposition on the subject of divorce and remarriage? **Did Jesus contemplate wife abuse,³ husband abuse, child abuse, desertion, or the withholding of conjugal rights?** In Jesus' response to the Pharisees in Matthew 19:1-12, did Jesus have in mind such crimes as murder, armed robbery, or physical as well as mental abuse on the part of one of the partners? **Did He contemplate these atrocities in His Sermon on the Mount when He discussed the teachings of the Pharisees and scribes about divorce and remarriage (Matthew 5:31-32)?** Are these hypothetical or imaginary cases or are these circumstances that we need to review in making a judgment about the innocent party?

³See James O'Reilly, "Wife Beating: The Silent Crime" *Time* 5 (September 1983), 23, writes:

Nearly 6 million wives will be abused by their husbands in any one year. **Some 2,000 to 4,000 women are beaten to death annually.** The nation's police spend one third of their time responding to domestic-violence calls. Battery is the single major cause of injury to women, more significant than auto accidents, rapes or muggings. (Emphasis mine—bold)

Again, he captures the mentality of many preachers, elders, or editors of religious journals, when they encourage the battered-wife to stay in such a relationship:

If the woman does not leave or seek help after the first episode, it can be taken as a sign of acquiescence, which usually leads to more violence. But it is extremely difficult to pack up and go, even if a woman can afford to. Explains Jane Tolliver, a counselor in the Atlanta Y.W.C.A.'S battered-women's program: "They've been told by their ministers and their families that a good woman can change a man." These women represent society's traditional values. Says Tolliver: "They are nurturing. They want successful marriages. And it is precisely those things that trap them" (Ibid., 24, the "underlining" is my emphasis--RDB).

Are these acts of violence included in the word “fornication” or did Jesus exclude every crime except “sexual immorality”? Were these words of Jesus simply “**overstatement**” or “**exaggeration**” to emphasize the original intent of God? These are questions that require response. **When we limit divorce and remarriage to “sexual immorality,” we often create impossible situations for individuals who suffer from circumstances beyond their control.** For example, consider the following trauma that two women experienced in their marital relationships. One of the husbands was involved in a very heinous murder and the other husband was deeply involved in wife abuse of great degradation.

CASE ONE

The following is a brief scenario of two men who conspired to kill the wife of one of them. According to a police report, **Grady Gibson**⁴ and **Eddie Hart** combined forces to kill Eddie’s wife to collect insurance money (\$150,000). Eddie (the murdered woman’s husband) and Grady collected the money, but their clandestine operation was not discovered until almost two years after the killing—both men were eventually brought to trial. One of the men, Grady, who almost decapitated Eddie’s wife, received life without parole for his part in the homicide. On the other hand, Eddie, the dead woman’s husband, received a fifty-year sentence.⁵ Now the dilemma!

What is the status of Mrs. Gibson, the wife of Grady? Is Mrs. Gibson bound to her husband for life? Since Grady did not pull Eddie’s wife’s “panties” off, does Mrs. Gibson have the right to divorce Grady and marry someone else? What did Grady do? He just almost cut the woman’s head off. Now, according to some, if he had just had sex with her, then, Mrs. Gibson would have a biblical reason for divorce. But since he just almost cut her head off—“bound for life” is the battle cry of many preachers and elders.⁶

CASE TWO

In 1988, the *Montgomery Advertiser* (20th of April) published excerpts from a letter by an “abused wife.” She wrote that she “was beaten, stomped, kicked, burned with cigarettes and

⁴As far as I have been able to determine, Grady Gibson is still serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole. On the other hand, Eddie Hart was paroled (8-2-2004) after serving seventeen years of his fifty-year sentence. He was charged with manslaughter. My understanding that Grady Gibson is now on parole

⁵I am reporting this story as it appeared in the newspaper as well as from relatives of the slain girl. This story illustrates the extravagance that many leaders revert to in their “wooden interpretation” of the divorce sayings. Some individuals have questioned whether they were guilty or not. I am using this scenario as a classic example of the extremes that numerous leaders take concerning the divorce sayings.

⁶This is no joke. It is true! I have talked with a number of preachers, who say, “Still Bound for Life.” Does this kind of reasoning remind one of the reasoning that Jesus encountered with the religious leaders in His day? The Pharisees, teachers of the law, and elders of the people had no concept of “mercy” over “law.” This narrow or constricted philosophy is still in vogue today (12-09-2019) by many religious leaders today, especially among preachers and elders. I thank God that this kind of attitude is not prevalent with all preachers and elders. I know of many who repudiate such illogical thinking.

stabbed.” This is not all! There is much more to this horror. She further describes her mistreatment: **“He threw me into a wall so hard that my head went through the paneling. The man was also a gun fanatic. His favorite game when he was drinking was his version of Russian roulette. His gun, my head.”**

Now the dilemma! Does God expect a woman to live with a man like that? Is this woman forbidden by God to divorce this brutal, inhuman, ruthless, savage, uncaring, heartless, cold-blooded, violent, sick person, simply because “sexual immorality” was not involved? If she does divorce, can she remarry without sinning? Many would say bound for life! Why? Well, you know that adultery was not committed! **Is there a biblical solution to the apparent problem?** Is there the possibility of exaggeration in Jesus’ statements concerning divorce? In considering the dilemmas of these two women, we should examine the use of overstatement as used by our Lord in His teaching techniques. Not only did Jesus avail Himself of this method, but also the Holy Spirit employs this procedure throughout the Scriptures. By not giving attention to this teaching style, one may misapply and pervert the Bible.

Overstatement and Hyperbole

Exaggeration consists of *hyperbole* as well as *overstatement*. **What is the distinction between *hyperbole* and *overstatement*?** Robert Stein, Senior Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says that *hyperbole* contains a bold **exaggeration** that cannot literally occur, but, on the other hand, *overstatement* is a bold exaggeration that can occur.⁷ **Is exaggeration or overstatement involved in the divorce sayings? A study of overstatement or hyperbole can assist us in a correct interpretation of many confusing Scriptures—especially Scriptures found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48). One of the divorce sayings (5:31-32) that Matthew records is found in this well-known Sermon.** Some of the most startling uses of exaggeration are found in Jesus’ Sermon. Through this practice of exaggeration, He captures the attention of His listeners and forcefully brings home His point.

Before analyzing the various pericopes concerning divorce, we need to read for ourselves the divorce sayings in the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke):

Matthew 5:31-32	Matthew 19:1-9
It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.	When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. ² Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. ³ Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” ⁴ “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator

⁷Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Sayings in the Gospels: Jesus’ Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 48-49.

	<p>‘made them male and female,’ ⁵and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” ⁷ “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” ⁸Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. ⁹I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”</p>
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Mark 10:1-12	Luke 16:18
<p>Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. ²Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” ³“What did Moses command you?” he replied. ⁴ They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” ⁵ “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. ⁶“But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” ¹⁰When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits</p>	<p>Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.</p>

adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”	
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Having just read these Scriptures from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, how do we know that Jesus employed *exaggeration* or *overstatement* in His handling of the question of divorce? First, consider the two different narratives as reported by Mark and Luke.

Mark 10:11	Luke 16:18
He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.”	Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Is there anything in these verses that jumps out at you? Why is it that Mark and Luke leave out some data that He included in the Matthean accounts? Did Jesus include the “exemption” clause in Mark and Luke? No! It is not there. Neither writer chronicles the “exemption” clause. On the other hand, Matthew attaches the “exemption” clause. Why? Does this inclusion in Matthew suggest that he understood the words reported by Mark and Luke to be *overstatement*? On the one hand, it appears that the words in Mark and Luke are absolute, no exemptions. But, on the other hand, Matthew, with divine authority, interprets Jesus’ words as forbidding divorce, but NOT in an absolute sense as reported by Mark and Luke.⁸ For example, Matthew records, “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.” Why are there differences in the various accounts?

Are there any other exceptions other than what Matthew mentioned? **What about Paul’s letter to Corinth** in which he dealt with the subject of desertion on the part of the unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:15). How did Paul deal with the issue of defection? Did Paul not know about Jesus’ teachings as recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke? **Did Paul understand Jesus’ teaching about divorce as overstatement in order to stress the original intent of marriage?** Just a cursory reading of Paul’s first letter to Corinth reveals that he did not interpret the divorce sayings in the Synoptics as an absolute statement with no ramifications. When the unbeliever

⁸Did Jesus give the *exemption clause* in His confrontation with the religious leaders as recorded by Mark and Luke? Both Mark 10:1-12 and Matthew 19:1-9 chronicle the same sketch. How do we account for the discrepancy? Which of the two recordings are original? If Jesus gave the *exemption clause*, we wonder why Mark and Luke left out this phrase. Did Jesus later discuss this absolute statement, as reported by Mark and Luke, with His disciples? Did He discuss this subject of divorce at a later time with His disciples in the same way He did with them about the “leaven of the Pharisees” (Matthew 16:5-12)? Did He explain His divorce saying in greater detail? Or did Matthew understand from the beginning that exaggeration or *overstatement* was involved in this divorce saying?

abandons the believer, Paul writes: “But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace” (1 Corinthians 7:15). “‘Not bound’ . . . almost certainly means free to marry,” writes Stein.⁹

Does Paul contradict Jesus’ teachings as reported by the synoptic writers? Did not Paul also write under the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Matthew inserts “fornication.” Paul injects “desertion,” but Mark and Luke do not mention any valid reasons for divorce. Do Mark and Luke contradict Matthew and Paul? How do we harmonize the differences in the various accounts of the divorce sayings? Perhaps the answer lies in the literary technique of exaggeration. We can safely conclude that Jesus employed *overstatement* and *hyperbole* in the Sermon on the Mount in order to highlight certain truths. Stein captures the usefulness of this literary technique in dealing with the subject of divorce. His comments about *exaggeration* in the divorce sayings are extremely helpful in unraveling the mystery that surrounds some of the most difficult teachings in Christendom. He writes,

Exaggeration used for effect. . . . A second example is the “exception clause” in Jesus’ teaching on divorce. We find the teaching in its absolute form in three instances and with the exception clause in two. . . . Although some would argue the reverse, most scholars believe that the unqualified form of the saying in Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians is closer to Jesus’ actual words than are the Matthean versions with the exception clause. In the three non-Matthean versions we have a more authentic teaching of Jesus on divorce.... We have already established that Jesus made frequent use of **exaggeration**. Is it possible that his sayings on divorce are an **exaggeration**, and that Matthew introduces the exception clause to bring out its true meaning?¹⁰ (Emphasis mine—bold)

A statement that conflicts with what is said elsewhere may contain exaggeration. For instance, in the Synoptics and Pauline writings, there are differences that exist in the divorce sayings. How do we account for the *apparent, not real*, contradictions? If we are to understand *apparent* contradictions, as opposed to *real* contradictions, we have to look at the totality of God’s Word. We must seek to understand **exaggeration in light of its context. An example of exaggeration is found in Jesus’ statement concerning one’s relatives: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Did Jesus mean this literally? **How do we harmonize Luke 14:26 with Mark 7:9-13?** When the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the Law entered into direct conflict with Jesus, He questioned them about their disregard for the commandment about honoring father and mother. Listen to Mark as he narrates the events:**

And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe^c your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’^d and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’^e ¹¹ But you say that if a man says to his father

⁹Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Passages in the Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 130.

¹⁰Robert H. Stein, *Difficult Sayings in the Gospels: Jesus’ Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole*, 48-49.

^c Some manuscripts *set up*

^d Exodus 20:12; Deut. 5:16

^e Exodus 21:17; Lev. 20:9

or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God),¹² then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” (Mark 7: 9-13)

In Mark 7:9, Matthew informs the readers that Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and teachers of the Law for not honoring their fathers and mothers. There is an *apparent* contradiction, not a *real* contradiction between Luke 14:26 and Mark 7:9. On the one hand, one is told to hate father and mother, but, on the other hand, one is told to honor them. What is the answer to this dilemma? Hating parents is obviously an *overstatement*. What did Jesus seek to emphasize with such a bold statement in Luke 14:26? Was it not to put God first in one’s life?

Another *apparent*, though not *real*, contradiction appears in Luke 6:27-36. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus addresses the attitude that His disciples should exemplify in their lives:

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.³² If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them.³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that.³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full.³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:27-36)

How do we reconcile Luke 6:27-36 with Luke 14:26 (see above citation)? We simply accept the statements in Luke 14:26 and Luke 6:27-36 as true and we must. On the surface, there is an *apparent* contradiction, even though not a *real* contradiction. Unless we accept one of these statements as *overstatement*, then, there is contradiction. By Jesus employing *overstatement* in Luke 14:26, He effectively brings home His intent—God is preeminent. Another example of *overstatement* is found in Matthew 5:42. Jesus says: “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” Did Jesus intend for this Scripture to authorize an individual’s demand for money without any discrimination on the part of the giver? How many are willing to follow this saying as an absolute statement that is binding on the person being asked?

Are there no reservations in lending a helping hand? Have we ever turned away someone? If so, have we violated Jesus’ command in Matthew 5:42? If you interpret this literally and not as *overstatement*, would you please send me your telephone number immediately—and I mean now! Do I sense hesitation? Isn’t it strange how quickly we can see an *overstatement* in this command of Jesus when it concerns money? What is Jesus seeking to emphasize with such a bold statement? Is He not going straight to the “jugular vein” of covetousness? Does Jesus want greed to die? It appears that Jesus desires us to share with those

who are less fortunate than ourselves. It is in this same vein that James, our Lord's brother, also captures the essence of Jesus' words when he writes:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? (James 2:14-16)

Again, it is necessary to compare Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:42 with Paul's statement to the Thessalonians. He forcefully writes:

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." ¹¹ We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. ¹² Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. ¹³ And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. ¹⁴ If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. ¹⁵ Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. (2 Thessalonians 3:10-15)

Is there a contradiction between the words of Jesus and the words of Paul? On the surface there is an *apparent* contradiction, but not a *real* contradiction. Jesus captures the attention of His listeners and forcefully brings home God's distaste for covetousness. Jesus could have mentioned "exemptions" to His statement in Matthew 5:42, but this elaboration would have taken away from the focal point—namely, our tightfistedness. Another example of **exaggeration** is Jesus' admonition about prayer: "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). **Does Jesus forbid public prayers?** Does not Jesus use **overstatement** to illustrate that praying is not to be done to be seen of men and women? Whatever work of righteousness we do must be performed to God's glory, not for self or for man or woman. We must never carry out our good works to acquire praise from others. Jesus warns His disciples against pretentious works: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1).

Yet, on the other hand, in this same Sermon, Jesus encourages the disciples to do good works: "Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:15-16). Here again there is an *apparent* contradiction, but not a *real* contradiction. Jesus uses **overstatement** to emphasize that performance of religious acts must come from the heart. In other words, Jesus is saying that personal prayer is not for display and neither are works for exhibition. Our acts of righteousness are matters between us and God. Scripture abounds in the use of **overstatement** and **exaggeration** to underscore God's real intention. For instance, consider Jesus' use of **overstatement** to highlight the importance of eliminating sin from one's life:

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matthew 5:29-30)

Does Jesus teach that we must mutilate our bodies? This statement about mutilation of body parts is a classic example of *overstatement* in the teachings of Jesus. *Overstatement* and *hyperbole* abound in Jesus' teachings in the Synoptics. Is there a distinction between these two forms of exaggeration? Yes! An *overstatement* is an **exaggeration that is literally possible but *hyperbole* is literally impossible.** To illustrate this separation, consider the following words of Jesus: "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24). Jesus employs *hyperbole* to press home a point. Although a camel cannot go through the "eye of a needle" (*hyperbole*), nevertheless, a rich man can be saved. The point of this *hyperbole* is to emphasize with the absurd the difficulty of a rich person being saved. On the other hand, Jesus uses *overstatement* to draw attention to a central point without drawing attention to exemptions, which would weaken His emphasis. We could literally gouge out our eyes (*overstatement*), and we could literally cut off our hands (*overstatement*), but, on the other hand, a camel cannot go through the "eye of a needle" (*hyperbole*). *Hyperbole* and *overstatement* were employed as teaching techniques by Jesus to capture the attention of His listeners.

Overstatements in the Divorce Sayings

Overstatement is apparently the answer to the much debated divorce sayings in the Synoptics. Jesus frequently employs various methods to inculcate, or instill, His truths. The divorce sayings as reported by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul may very well have included these procedures to stress the importance of the institution of marriage. By comparing all of the divorce sayings, we can safely conclude that Jesus used **exaggeration** for calling attention to the original design of marriage. If we apply the same principles to the divorce sayings that we have applied to other sayings of Jesus, we can then arrive at a working postulate upon which to form a judgment about the propriety or impropriety of divorce and remarriage for reasons other than sexual immorality.

In our study of the divorce sayings, we can rule out *hyperbole*. Divorce is something we can do, that is to say, it is possible, not impossible. We can divorce with or without God's blessings. It appears that the words of Jesus are simply *overstatement*. A perusal of the divorce sayings in the Synoptics and Pauline writings reveals that the divorce accounts do not agree. Observe the following accounts:

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery. (Mark 10:11-12)

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:32)

I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery. (Matthew 19:9)

But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. (1 Corinthians 7:15)

Neither Mark nor Luke takes notice of the “marital unfaithfulness” phrase as grounds for divorce. On the other hand, Matthew introduces the exemption clause (“marital unfaithfulness”) twice. Then, in addition to the “marital unfaithfulness” clause, Paul adds “desertion” as an additional reason.¹¹ What does all of this mean? How can we harmonize *apparent* contradictions, not *real* contradictions—with the above citations? When we compare Scripture with Scripture, we can often learn whether a particular saying is an exaggeration or a specific command. The question might be asked, why would Jesus introduce exaggeration in the divorce sayings? It appears that Jesus implements exaggeration to accentuate certain truths. Why is it that neither Mark nor Luke journaled the exemption clause? We wonder if the teachings of Jesus, as journaled by Mark and Luke, fall under *overstatement*. Since neither Mark nor Luke registers the exemption clause, is it possible that Jesus employs *overstatement*? Recognition of this teaching technique of exaggeration enables us to more accurately interpret the intent of the author. An awareness of exaggeration in the Scriptures will assist us in seeking biblical answers to the baffling question of divorce and remarriage that has plagued the church for centuries. It is obvious that there are no “pat” answers to this dilemma.

MERCY VERSUS LAW

The second aspect of this essay deals with *mercy* taking precedence over *law*. Even if exaggeration (granted for the sake of argument) is not involved in the divorce sayings as advanced in the beginning of this in-depth study, nevertheless, there is still the principle of *mercy* over *law* coming into play. To illustrate this principle of *mercy* over *law*, a number of illustrations are presented to call attention to this vital concept of *mercy* taking precedence over *law* in dealing with the many problems individuals face in the marital relationship. Adultery or fornication is not always the issue in the dissolution of the marriage bond. To illustrate this principle of *mercy* taking precedence over *law*, the story of David and the Bread of the Presence is analyzed.

¹¹Does *marital unfaithfulness* include *desertion*? Does *marital unfaithfulness* include “wife-battering”? Is the word “fornication” more comprehensive in its total meaning than just *sexual immorality*?

David and the Bread of the Presence

How do David and the Bread of the Presence help us in understanding the divorce sayings in the Synoptics and Paul? Hopefully, an analysis of this episode will shed light from which we may draw principles upon which to base biblical decisions. Again, even if **exaggeration** is not found in the divorce sayings, we may consider *mercy* as another alternative to our dilemma in dealing with divorce. **Mercy over law** is another aspect we need to analyze in seeking an answer to the perplexing problems surrounding divorce and remarriage. To paint a picture about the righteousness of *mercy* taking preference over the righteousness of *law*, we only need to read about David and the twelve loaves of bread in the Holy Place.

Matthew records Jesus' reference to an incident that occurred in the days of Abiathar the high priest. Behind this scene lies the original statement respecting the eating of the sacred bread. Moses gave instructions concerning the "bread of the Presence"—it belonged only to Aaron and his sons, that is, only to the priests:

Take fine flour and bake twelve loaves of bread, using two-tenths of an ephah^a for each loaf. ⁶ Set them in two rows, six in each row, on the table of pure gold before the LORD. ⁷ Along each row put some pure incense as a memorial portion to represent the bread and to be an offering made to the LORD by fire. ⁸ This bread is to be set out before the LORD regularly, Sabbath after Sabbath, on behalf of the Israelites, as a lasting covenant. ⁹ **It belongs to Aaron and his sons, who are to eat it in a holy place, because it is a most holy part of their regular share of the offerings made to the LORD by fire.** (Leviticus 24:5-9)

This consecrated bread was preserved only for the priests, no one else. Moses did not enter any "exemptions" to this rule. But we do read of an incident in the life of David where he and his men did eat of the consecrated bread because of hunger. This story is found in First Samuel:

David went to Nob [nōb] to Ahimelech [â-hīm' -ě-lěk] the priest. Ahimelech trembled when he met him, and asked, "Why are you alone? Why is no one with you?" ² David answered Ahimelech the priest, "The king charged me with a certain matter and said to me, 'No one is to know anything about your mission and your instructions.' As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place. ³ Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find." ⁴ But the priest answered David, "I don't have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women." ⁵ David replied, "Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever^a I set out. The men's things^b are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!" ⁶ So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the **bread of the Presence** that had been removed from before the LORD and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away. (1 Samuel 21:1-6)

^a That is, probably about 4 quarts (about 4.5 liters)

^a Or *from us in the past few days since*

^b Or *bodies*

Jesus uses this circumstance to explain by example the principle of *mercy* over *law*. Matthew cites the first face-to-face confrontation of the religious leaders with Jesus in Matthew 12. The Pharisees rebuked His disciples for picking some heads of grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry. Mark, as well as Luke, also tells about this showdown. We must consider carefully the parallel accounts of Jesus' encounter with the religious leaders in dealing with the subject of divorce and remarriage. We learn a great deal about *mercy* taking the lead over *law*. It appears that many Christians are as blind as were the Pharisees in this skirmish with Jesus over the *traditions of the elders*. The following are the three accounts of the David episode as reported by Matthew, Mark, and Luke:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. ²When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." ³He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. ⁵Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? ⁶I tell you that one^a greater than the temple is here. ⁷If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,'^b you would not have condemned the innocent. ⁸For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:1-8)

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" ²⁵He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." ²⁷Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:23-28)

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. ²Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" ³Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? **⁴He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat.** And he also gave some to his companions." ⁵Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." (Luke 6:1-5)

Jesus said that David and his men did that which "was **not** lawful for them to do, but only for the priests" (Matthew 12:4; Mark 2:25-26; Luke 6:4). In other words, in today's parlance, it was "unscriptural," as we would say within many fellowships of God's people. In spite of this unlawfulness though, Jesus illustrates that it is always lawful to be humane and to save life. In other words, such compassionate acts are within the true "spirit of the law." Under normal circumstances, God would have condemned David for his disobedience to Moses' command, but because of the critical situation of need for food, compassion took supremacy over statute law.

^a Or *something*; also in verses 41 and 42

^b Hosea 6:6

Matthew also adds another detail, which neither Mark nor Luke records, concerning Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:7-8). In other words, Jesus is stressing mercy over the Sabbath. It is also significant that neither Matthew nor Luke adds: "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**" (Mark 2:27). With this statement, Jesus highlights the priority of men and women over law. Jesus' forcefully sets forth the concept that men and women were not made for law, but rather, law was created for their benefit. Ordinarily, we would keep the Sabbath, but, on the other hand, there could be mitigating conditions in which mercy would take rank over the Sabbath. The implication is that we must understand that men and women were not brought into being to keep the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was conceived for their welfare. If in the keeping of the Sabbath, it would be detrimental to men and women, then, grace takes the lead over the Sabbath.

Principles Applied to Marriage Bond

Is this a principle that one could apply to the marriage bond when one finds himself or herself in an impossible situation? Was man or woman made for marriage? Or was marriage made for their benefit? It appears that the "tradition of the elders" is still alive and well on planet earth. Many still do not understand that men and women were not made for law, but law was made for their benefit (Mark 2:27). Many Christians, especially elders and preachers, still exercise the same kind of self-righteousness the Pharisees exhibited when they condemn the innocent party in a divorce when the offended person refuses to continue to live in an environment that is dangerous, risky, and hazardous to his or her well-being.¹² We must never forget that the Son of Man is Lord of the initial institution of marriage as well as Lord of the Sabbath. It is true that God intends one man and one woman for life. **Nevertheless, God, because of sin, that is to say, hardness of the heart of men and women (Matthew 19:8), did give a safety valve (divorce) for an impossible situation (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).**

Jesus brought to the attention of the religious leaders the original intent of marriage. In the Garden of Eden, there was no need of a law concerning the marriage covenant, but after sin entered, God dealt with divorce because of the sinfulness of human beings (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). It is in this same vein that God dealt with murder. After Adam's and Eve's expulsion from their Edenic home, God issued instructions about those who took another person's life (Genesis 9:6). Prior to this expulsion, there was no need to address this issue—sin had not yet entered the world. Thus, in Deuteronomy, Moses records what the Lord revealed to him concerning the unthinkable conditions in marriage. Even when Moses says, "and he writes her a certificate of divorce" (Deuteronomy 24:1), it was still God's design that there be one man and one woman for life (Matthew 19:4-6).

Again, men and women were not made for marriage, but marriage was initiated for their happiness. The original purpose in marriage is still one man and one woman for life; but since

¹²The attitude of the religious leaders in this episode of adherence to the traditions of the elders reminds one of the self-righteousness the Pharisees exhibited on numerous occasions in their rebuke of Jesus.

sin entered the world, there may be mitigating situations in which *mercy* takes supremacy over God's initial meaning of the institution of marriage. In other words, God in his *mercy* makes provisions for the dissolution of marriages when the hardness of the heart prevails (Matthew 19:8; Deuteronomy 24:1-4).¹³

Thus far, *exaggeration* and *mercy* have been considered in seeking answers to the complexities encountered in the ending of the marriage bond. Can we exclude *exaggeration* and *mercy* as possible answers for our dilemma in a dangerous relationship? Is there another alternative for the dissolution of marriage when we are confronted with an absolute statement about divorce that does not set forth exemptions? What do we do with an absolute statement when no exemptions are made? Since the statements about marriage and divorce in both Mark and Luke are absolute, can we find relief from a hopeless situation in marriage? Before proceeding with an analysis of the absoluteness of the divorce sayings, it is in order to consider another graphic case of physical abuse.

CASE THREE

On December 12, 1988, Hedda Nussbaum appeared on the coversheet of *Newsweek*.¹⁴ This is the story of two persons who lived together, but were not, as I understand it, married. Nevertheless, this case still serves as a vivid illustration of the predicament that women face in the real world of men. This scenario is still the same as countless women who are married can testify. If the two had been married, would she have had a valid reason to divorce her husband? Before one makes a decision, he or she should read the “rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey would say. Ann Jones writes about Hedda Nussbaum's picture that appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* on December 12, 1988 following her arrest:

There had been other “battered women” on the covers of other magazines—Ms. For one—pretty, posed models, delicately bruised with makeup in subtle tones of mauve and heliotrope, their eyes cast down in simulation of shame or sadness. But nothing like this. Hedda Nussbaum was the real thing. The photo was shot as she testified against her companion of twelve years, Joel Steinberg, who was charged with murder for beating to death the six-year-old girl the couple had illegally “adopted.” (Hired as an attorney to place the child, Steinberg simply took her home.) Hedda Nussbaum's bruises had healed and the discolorations faded, but her face remained permanently scarred and misshapen, remodeled first by Joel Steinberg and subsequently by Dr. Monte Keen, plastic surgeon—the man-made face of America's most famous battered woman.¹⁵

¹³Does Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:1-9 contradict Deuteronomy 24:1-4?

¹⁴See Ann Jones, *Next Time, She'll Be Dead: Battering & How to Stop It* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994), 167-198, for detailed information about her torture from her companion of twelve years, Joel Steinberg. See also “Interview with Hedda Nussbaum with Larry King Live/ June 16, 2003” [ONLINE]. Available from <http://www.rickross.com/reference/abusive/abusive1.html> (accessed 25 July 2008). This report is a twenty-three page interview, which gives many details concerning circumstances surrounding this case. See also *The New York Times* [ONLINE]. Available from http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/n/hedda_nussbaum/index.html (accessed 25 July 2008). Joel Steinberg was released from prison Wednesday nearly 17 years behind bars. He is now 63; he served two-thirds of the maximum 25 year manslaughter sentence. Released (2021)

¹⁵ *Next Time, She'll Be Dead*, 167.

I remember my first impression about this story. I thought she and her husband ought to be put to death, but, I made judgments without knowing the full story. “That face made some people weep. It made others want to destroy her, especially women. Put her on trial, they said. Lock her up. Get rid of her. Just look at what she let him do to her. Look at what she let him do to her child,” writes Jones.¹⁶ After the jury heard only the part that the judge would allow—not the whole story of abuse—they emerged from the jury room on January 30th with a verdict—Not Guilty of murder—but Guilty of manslaughter in the first degree.

Jones reports that at the time Hedda Nussbaum met Joel Steinberg, “She was thirty-two, good-looking, a rising editor of children’s books at Random House, and he was thirty-three, good-looking, a lawyer, and (like Nussbaum) Jewish.”¹⁷ This is a description of Nussbaum when she met Steinberg in 1975.¹⁸ When she was arrested on November 2, 1987, a doctor from the New York University Medical Center, who examined her from head to toe on November 3, 1987, described the forty-five year old woman to the jury as

... anemic, debilitated, malnourished, wasted, limping, and hunch-backed from osteoporosis. He found “old and new lacerations on her scalp, chunks of hair torn out from the right side of her head, an old ulceration and a new fracture on her nose, a black eye, lacerated upper lip, three- or four-month old fractures on both cheekbones, a scar on the abdomen, bruises on the abdomen and back, eight fractured right ribs, seven fractured left ribs, a very large new bruise on the right hip with many scarred areas around it, old abrasion on the left leg, and two deep, three-inch-wide ulcers on the right leg, which was infected, partly gangrenous, and red and swollen from foot to knee.” The ulcerated lesions on Nussbaum’s lower right leg were ‘potentially fatal’ injuries, the doctor said, which if untreated “could have led to blood poisoning and cardiovascular collapse.”¹⁹

Jimmy Breslin wrote in *Newsday*, “She looked as if she had just fought Fritzie Zivic in Pittsburgh. Fritzie used to get his thumb into an eye and turn it like he was dialing a phone number.”²⁰ Again, Jones says that Paul Hamill of the *New York Post* was “most shocked by the nose.” He also wrote, “This is the nose of an old pug, some club-fighting veteran of the St. Nicholas Arena or Eastern Parkway, battered and hurt and healed and hurt again, until it is no longer the nose worn when young.”²¹ The prosecutor Peter Casolaro wanted Nussbaum to tell the jury about some of Steinberg’s assault, but Judge Harold Rothwax decided that the jury could not hear about his history of abuse for fear that that knowledge would inflame the jury. Prior to Nussbaum’s testimony, Casolaro outlined thirty-two incidents of assaults. The newspapers printed summaries. The following is a list of atrocities taken from *Newsday*’s “Catalog of Abuse,” cited in Jones:

¹⁶ Ibid., 168.

¹⁷ Ibid., 182.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 168-169.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

1. In March 17, 1978. The first time Steinberg struck Nussbaum, hitting her in the eye with an open hand. She required hospital treatment. Admitted into evidence.
2. 1978. Steinberg gave Nussbaum at least ten black eyes.
3. Feb. 4, 1981. Steinberg ruptured Nussbaum's spleen in a beating. She had to go to St. Vincent's Hospital to have it removed. Admitted into evidence.
4. In 1982. Steinberg beat Nussbaum and she sought treatment at St. Vincent's for broken ribs.
5. In 1983. Steinberg used a broomstick to beat her on the feet, causing injury and scars.
6. Late 1983 through 1984. Steinberg beat her severely and repeatedly during this period. Her face was disfigured, her nose broken, and her ear cauliflowered. Steinberg restricted her movements, presumably so her injuries would not be noticed. Once, when she phoned her father for help, Steinberg threw her down. This point admitted into evidence. Feb. 11, 1984. Her knee was broken in a beating and she limped to Bellevue Hospital for treatment. April 14, 1984. She was beaten and ran away.
7. In 1984. Steinberg kicked Nussbaum in the eye, producing serious injury.
8. In 1984. Steinberg hit Nussbaum in the eye, leaving her with a swollen eye.
9. In 1984. Steinberg beat Nussbaum after she refused to take a cold In 1985. Steinberg used a stick to beat Nussbaum's sexual organs, causing them to swell for several months. In a subsequent beating, she hemorrhaged.
10. In 1985. Steinberg urinated on Nussbaum twice after throwing her to the floor.
11. Same as number 16.
12. September 1985. Steinberg handcuffed Nussbaum in the bathroom and forced her to sleep there.
13. In 1985. Steinberg handcuffed Nussbaum to a chinning bar in the bedroom and told her to sleep there.
14. In 1985. Steinberg struck Nussbaum, chipping or knocking out teeth.
15. bath and then threw her into the bath with her clothes on. She ran away.
16. In 1984. Steinberg choked Nussbaum, damaging her vocal cords.
17. August 1984. Steinberg gave Nussbaum a black eye. She lost her job with Random House while staying home to recuperate. Admitted into evidence.
18. Late 1984 to early 1985. Steinberg used a blowtorch used for freebasing to burn Nussbaum, leaving scars.
19. Late 1984. Steinberg took a bath with Nussbaum and then beat her "brutally."
20. Late 1984. Steinberg used a broomstick handle to beat her hands, leaving them permanently injured.
21. Late 1985 to early 1986. Steinberg knocked her down and she cut her wrist by falling against a filing cabinet, causing injury and scarring.
22. In 1986. Steinberg hit Nussbaum, knocking out more teeth.
23. In 1986. Steinberg beat up Nussbaum in a car on the way to visit his mother.
24. In 1986. Steinberg hit her head against a wall, causing her to bleed.
25. Late 1986 through 1987. Steinberg beat Nussbaum repeatedly with a metal exercise bar, especially during the two months before Lisa Steinberg's death on Nov. 5, 1987. Admitted into evidence.
26. In 1987. Steinberg struck Nussbaum with his open hand, splitting her lip repeatedly.
27. In 1987. Steinberg broke her nose again in a beating.
28. October 1987. Steinberg grabbed her by one ankle and one wrist and bounced her on the floor, severely bruising her buttocks.
29. Late 1987. When Nussbaum refused to take a cold bath, Steinberg threw her into the bathtub with her clothes on.
30. In 1987. Steinberg pulled her hair out numerous times.
31. October 1987. Steinberg repeatedly poked his fingers in Nussbaum's eyes, lacerating her nose once.
32. During the last nine years the couple lived together the physical abuse continued with regularity, a persistent tool used ... to control Miss Nussbaum, or ... to break her will.²²

²² Ibid., 170-173. Joel Steinberg was paroled in Jun 30, 2004. In 2017 (November 1), the New Your Post wrote: "Notorious child-killer still living in Harlem—and shows no remorse. Hedda Nussbaum (born August 8, 1942) as of November 15, 2019 is still living. Lisa Steinberg died on November 4, 1987; she was six years old.

Only four of the thirty-two barbarities committed against her were admitted into evidence during the trial. He received a sentence of 8 1/3 to 25 years for killing the child Lisa—no punishment for what he did to Miss Hedda Nussbaum.²³ One additional report of this case is given to make individuals aware of the problems that many individuals face in the “ends and outs” of everyday life. Ronald Sullivan wrote in *The Metropolitan News* the following account of the atrocities committed against Miss Nussbaum:

- At the direction of a female detective, Ms. Nussbaum, dressed in a dark turtleneck sweater and blue jeans, displayed her injuries to the camera, pulling up her sweater and pulling down her pants in the process. As one juror winced at the sight and others shook their heads in disbelief, the tape showed massive cuts and bruises and evidence of other injuries all over Ms. Nussbaum’s body. For example, a dark bruise the size of a saucer was on her right buttock. Her right wrist was deformed, where a broken bone had healed incorrectly. Deep green ulcerations covered the length of her right leg. The condition of that leg caused one juror to gasp in shock.
- Earlier two prosecution witnesses told the jury that Ms. Nussbaum appeared to have just suffered a savage beating when detectives and a child-abuse worker tried to question her and Mr. Steinberg about Lisa’s injuries. “Her nose was caved in; her face was swollen; she was a mass of black-and-blue marks,” said Joseph Petrizzo, a child-abuse caseworker in the New York City Bureau of Special Services for Children.
- “She had a broken nose, blackened eyes, a split lip, and big clumps of her hair were missing,” said Robert Columbia, a police detective assigned to sex crimes and child-abuse cases. “She was limping and she looked dazed and confused.”
- Charges of murder against Ms. Nussbaum have been dismissed on the ground that she was so beaten she was incapable of saving Lisa from death (their daughter). Ms. Nussbaum is expected to be the main prosecution witness.²⁴

What reaction should we exercise toward those who find themselves in an impossible situation of such cruelty? Do we say, “Adultery not involved, still bound for life”? The response of many preachers and elders today is the height of “legalism.” It is on par with the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, perhaps even worse. The “letter of the law” is the battle cry of many, no mercy—just law. **Let God’s people turn once more to Holy Scripture for a biblical solution. A biblical example should help us in seeking a biblical solution to such a baffling problem for many Christians.**

The case of David and the “Bread of the Presence,” as discussed above, is worthy of recall in analyzing the above scenario of physical abuse. This example still provides an excellent illustration of “absolute statement” when dealing with extenuating circumstances that allows for *mercy* to take superiority over *law*. We find an absolute statement concerning the eating of consecrated bread with no mention of exemptions. The Law is absolute, no mention of exemptions. But when Jesus called forth this case in His dealing with the religious leaders, we quickly observe that Jesus indicated that David was without guilt: “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (Matthew 12:7). Jesus informed the religious leaders that because of extenuating circumstances

²³ Ibid., 197.

²⁴ Ronald Sullivan, “Jurors See Graphic Tape of Nussbaum,” *Metropolitan News* 4 November 1988, 1 (B) and 6 (B).

surrounding David's predicament that God overrode *law* with *mercy* (A principle that many of our religious leaders have not yet learned.).

Although there are absolute statements²⁵ concerning the dissolution of marriage, does this fact indicate, in and of itself, that there cannot be exemption from the marriage bond for any reason other than sexual immorality? Does an absolute statement about divorce and remarriage exclude one from divorcing his or her spouse for abuse, child abuse, murder, robbery, fornication, or adultery? Does the innocent party have any recourse for the wickedness of a husband or wife?

Many wives and husbands have been poisoned, brutally beaten, stabbed—even to the point of paralysis or death—and others shot or killed. Is it God's design in marriage to have a woman or a man to live with a monster or maniac simply because he or she did not engage in sexual relations outside the marriage bond? Many would say yes, but, in spite of the consensus of many, we should still analyze any absolute statement in its *intended application*. If God did not legislate specifically concerning the above issues, then one should rely upon principles set forth in the Scriptures to make a valid judgment concerning divorce for other reasons *than sexual immorality*.

Legalistic Approach to This Dilemma

It is not uncommon for Christians to treat the Scriptures with the same legality that the religious leaders did in the days of Jesus. Just as the Pharisees used their Scriptures in an illegal manner to uphold their traditions, many Christians, unconsciously, do the same in their exposition of the divorce sayings. We should again reflect upon the confrontation of Jesus with the Pharisees in Matthew 12:1-12, in which Jesus reminds the Pharisees that David and his companions violated God's Law, but were not condemned. **Why were they not doomed?** Well, Jesus informs the religious leaders that there may be extenuating circumstances in which mercy takes precedence over Law. In this encounter, Jesus also calls attention to the principle of mercy over Law by reminding them of the Sabbath. Jesus penetrates their façade of hypocrisy by saying, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). **In other words, Jesus says that under the normal state of affairs, one would adhere to the Sabbath regulations, but there may be controlling factors in which mercy takes supremacy over Law.**

The relationship between the Old Testament incident of David (1 Samuel 21:1-6) and the *apparent* infringement of the Sabbath day by the disciples lies in the fact that on both occasions godly men did something forbidden—one by God, the other by man (traditions of the elders). Since, however, it is always "lawful" to do good and to save life (even on the Sabbath), both David and the disciples were within the "spirit" of the Law (see Isaiah 58:6-7; Luke 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6). The same reasoning may be applied to other commands from God—

²⁵An analysis of the divorce sayings appears to be *overstatement* rather than absolute statements. But for the sake of argument, should one advance the concept that the divorce sayings in Mark and Luke are not *overstatements*, then, one must deal with the concept of absolutes. Does an absolute statement about divorce forbid the dissolution of marriage under certain circumstances?

including marriage and divorce. Neither man nor woman was made for the “marriage law,” but the “marriage law” was made for their welfare. Again, there may be mitigating circumstances in which mercy takes level standing over law. Larry Richard’s²⁶ statement about the principles of mercy is to the point:

David’s need was seen by God as more important than the law’s regulation. And the priest’s service to Israel was, of course, more important than the Sabbath prohibition against work. In each case a principle of mercy—of deep concern for human need—took precedence over what was technically a violation of the law. **David and the priests broke the law but were adjudged innocent.**

Isn’t it possible that those who suffer the tragedy of divorce and who remarry do commit adultery, as David committed sacrilege, and yet are adjudged innocent? Doesn’t the law’s provision of divorce and its expectation of remarriage suggest that God can and does deal with divorce and remarriage with a mercy quite unlike the attitude of ancient and modern Pharisees who are preoccupied with legalities...? **It is here (Matthew 19) that Jesus points out that divorce was permitted because human hearts are hard, not because God desires divorce. Divorce was an expression of God’s mercy, not an affirmation of his ideal will.**²⁷ (Emphasis mine—underlining and bold)

SCENARIO OF JESUS AND THE PHARISEES

What are we to do with *apparent* contradictory statements existing in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul? To understand the teachings of Jesus on this subject, we must consider the scenario of Jesus’ confrontation with the Pharisees. First, Matthew informs his readers that the religious leaders came to Jesus when He entered the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Second, the Pharisees asked questions about divorce, not because they wanted to know what God had said, but rather to test Him: “Some Pharisees,” writes Matthew, “came to him to test him” (Matthew 19:3).

Jesus, upon being asked His view—“Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’” (Mark 10:2)—realized that the whole debate was focusing upon speculations about when the divine plan for marriage can be ignored. Jesus, out of regard for the basic plan and purpose of God in marriage, replied abruptly, “**It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law**” (Mark 10:5). In so responding to the Jewish leaders, Jesus is not concerned with hypothetical situations or exemptions. Rather, He is solicitous for the ideal design of God—one man and one woman for life (Mark 10:6-8).

In answer to the Pharisees’ question about divorce, Jesus could have said, “It is written” (Matthew 4:4), and then cited the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. But in this confrontation, He did not exegete God’s words on divorce to Moses, but rather, He took them

²⁶ **Larry Richards** holds a BA in philosophy from the University of Michigan, a ThM in Christian education from Dallas Theological Seminary, and a PhD in religious education and social psychology College Graduate School, served as a minister of Christian education, and written over 200 books, including theological works, commentaries, and several specialty and study Bibles. Larry is currently from Garrett Biblical Seminary and Northwestern University jointly. He has taught at Wheaton a full-time author and speaker and lives with his wife, Sue, in **Raleigh, North Carolina.**

²⁷ Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of the Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 234-35.

back to the original institution of marriage before the fall (Genesis 1-3). A parallel to this marital legislation is the law concerning murder. After the “fall” in the Garden of Eden, God dealt with murder; God issued a death warrant for all those guilty of murder: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Genesis 9:6). There was no reason for God to legislate concerning divorce and murder prior to the fall. But because of sin, God had to enact legislation to protect the innocent (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

Jesus did not seek to lay down a legal pronouncement to cover every hypothetical crisis in the lives of men and women. To teach that He did is to read more into the text than Jesus himself taught. How does one know this? First, it is significant that Mark and Luke leave out the “exemption clause” (Mark 10:10; Luke 16:18). On the other hand, Matthew includes this controversial clause in the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’ battle with the Jewish leaders (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). Then, Paul, in his first letter to Corinth, sets forth “desertion” by the unbeliever as another “exemption clause” (1 Corinthians 7:15). Did he contradict the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9? Did he contradict Mark 10:10 and Luke 16:18? Did he understand that Jesus was not giving a dissertation on marriage and divorce? Did he understand *overstatement* and *hyperbole* in the teachings of Jesus? Listen to Paul’s advice about desertion: “But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace” (1 Corinthians 7:15). Would this principle also apply in wife battering? If not, why not?

CONTEXT AND ITS INTENDED MEANING

Peace in the Messianic Age

In summary, the “divorce sayings” must be interpreted in light of their context and their intended meaning, which statements do not always mean what it says literally, that is, it may say one thing, but mean something else. To illustrate this principle, it is necessary to look at familiar passages in the book of Isaiah (11:6-9; 35:8-11) to highlight this proposition. We quickly observe that these two citations from Isaiah conflict with each other if interpreted literally. It is not sufficient simply to quote a passage of Scripture and say this is what the Bible says. Very often the Bible meanings are figurative and not literal. For example, in Isaiah 11 and 35, we are introduced to symbolic language:

Isaiah 11:6-9	Isaiah 35:8-10
<p>The <u>wolf will live with the lamb</u>, the <u>leopard will lie down with the goat</u>, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. ⁷The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. ⁹They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.</p>	<p>And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. ⁹No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, ¹⁰and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.</p>

A common interpretation of Isaiah 11:6-9 is that in the so-called millennium kingdom, carnivorous animals will be transformed into herbivorous ((h)ər-'biv-rəs) animals. But it is better to see this pericope (section) of Scripture as an exaggerated picture of the happiness and serenity of the coming messianic age. Isaiah describes, in very picturesque language, the animals of the wild as living together with the more gentle animals. In one passage, the “lion” is there, yet, on the other hand, the passage in Isaiah 35:8-10 excludes nonpeaceful animals in the picture of bliss and peace. Both passages, though literally contradictory, call forth different analogies to express the same reality, that is to say, peace in the coming messianic age.

Swallowing Camels

In Matthew 23:24, Jesus says, “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” Observe that Jesus says that the religious leaders swallowed a camel. The question is, did they? We must be careful to distinguish between the *words* of Jesus and the *meaning* Jesus intended to convey to His listeners. In most instances, the *words* and their *meanings* are the same, that is, a literal fulfillment is meant. In “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel,” the *words* and their *meanings* are not the same. For one to take these words literally would be to lose sight of the meaning Jesus intended these expressions to communicate. **Through the use of hyperbole, Jesus effectively heightened the effective nature of His thoughts.** The purpose of exaggerated language is to create a greater impression and to stir His hearers to reflect more closely upon the reality of their hypocritical actions and to consider more firmly His teachings.

Sawdust in the Eyes

Through exaggeration, Jesus is able to create a picture that is unforgettable. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” Who can forget the figures of “sawdust” in one’s eye and a “plank” in another eye. Who can forget the words of Jesus, “Again

I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). Such pictures are long remembered. Jesus employed bold language to impress upon the hearer the seriousness of what He was telling them.

Peace on Earth

Another example of exaggeration is found in Jesus’ announcement: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. **I did not come to bring peace, but a sword**” (Matthew 10:34). How do we harmonize this pronouncement with other statements in Matthew, Mark and Luke? For instance, consider the following:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. (Matthew 5:9)

He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” (Mark 5:34)

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.” (Luke 19:41-42)

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:13-14)

If we interpret “I did not come to bring peace” literally, then, this contradicts Mark’s and Luke’s “peace” sayings. Also, a literal interpretation would not harmonize with Paul’s letter to Rome: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). The context is the determining factor for Matthew 10:34. This sword did not have anything to do with politics or military action. Jesus employed the term “sword” as a metaphorical description of the division that faith in Christ often brings about; namely, the dissolution of the family unit when one member of the family becomes a Christian.

Praying in the Closet

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His disciples to pray secretly: “But when you pray, go into your room, **close the door and pray** to your Father, who is unseen” (Matthew 6:6). Is this command to be interpreted literally? Is this not *overstatement*? Can one pray in public, even though this command tells one to “close the door and pray”? Jesus did not always pray in His closet.

After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. (Mark 6:46)

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. (Luke 6:24)

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. (Luke 9:28)

Children were also brought to Jesus for prayers:

Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. ¹⁴ Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." ¹⁵ When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there. (Matthew 19:13-15)

Luke nor Mark mentions the prayers, but they do allude to Jesus' touching the children. No doubt He also prayed for and blessed the children.

Swearing

Another fine example of *overstatement* is Jesus' teaching on swearing. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says,

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

Is this an absolute prohibition against swearing? Can Christians swear in court? Can a Christian swear when taking his or her driver's license? The Sermon on the Mount abounds with *overstatement*. On another occasion Jesus did not forbid total refrain from swearing. In His confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus says,

Woe to you, blind guides! You say, "If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath." ¹⁷ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? ¹⁸ You also say, "If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath." ¹⁹ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. ²² And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it. (Matthew 23:16-22)

In this scenario, Jesus condemns the view of the religious leaders in their willingness to swear by the temple or the altar as nothing. On the other hand, if they swore by the gold of the temple or the gift that they offered on the altar, then, the oath is binding. It is also worthy of observation that Jesus did not refuse to be placed under oath. To begin with, Jesus remained silent; but the high priest said, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matthew 26:63). Then Jesus no longer remained silent: "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew

26:64). Jesus responds in compliance with the Law: “If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible” (Leviticus 5:1).

Hating Parents

How do we determine if a statement or saying is *hyperbole* or *overstatement*? The study of parallel passages often sheds light in helping to determine exaggeration. It is apparent that the Gospel writers were not always concerned with the *ipsissima verba*, or the “very words.” We cannot always be sure that the Evangelist sought to convey the exact wording of Jesus’ sayings. A good example is found in Luke 14:26 and its parallel in Matthew 10:37.

Luke 14:26	Matthew 10:37
If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.	Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Through Matthew’s account, we are able to observe that Jesus’ bidding to hate one’s family, as recorded in Luke 14:26, was not meant to be taken literally but was an *overstatement* used for effectiveness. In this hate relationship, Jesus employs exaggeration to highlight the superiority of faithfulness to God over faithfulness to family ties, as is evident from the fact that Jesus’ statement conflicts with His other clear statements about loving one’s parents or enemies. We should compare the following accounts in order to see that an interpretation that requires a wooden literalness involves contradictions:

And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe^c your own traditions! ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’^d and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’^e ¹¹But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), ¹²then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. ¹³Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” (Mark 7:9-13)

You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’ (Mark 10:19)

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. (Luke 6:27)

Yes, Jesus must be exaggerating in Luke 14:26. Jesus employed *overstatement* in His encouraging His disciples to submit to the teachings of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:2-3). This

^c Some manuscripts *set up*

^d Exodus 20:12; Deut. 5:16

^e Exodus 21:17; Lev. 20:9

statement conflicts with His teachings in Matthew 16:6; 16:11-12. On the surface there appears to be a *real* contradiction. But the contradiction is not *real* but only *apparent*.

Matthew 23:2-3	Matthew 16:6, 11-12
<p>The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.</p>	<p>“Be careful,” Jesus said to them. “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”</p> <p>“How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ¹² Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.</p>

When we seek to find in both passages an absolute reference to every single teaching of the Pharisees, do we find an unresolvable problem? In general, the teachings of Jesus were similar to that of the religious leaders. On the other hand, Jesus objected strenuously to the oral traditions of Pharisees and Scribes. Matthew writes:

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and ²saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. ³(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.^a) ⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?” ⁶ He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’^b ⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” ⁹ And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe^c your own traditions! ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’^d and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’^e ¹¹But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), ¹²then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. ¹³Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” (Mark 7:1-13)

^a Some early manuscripts *pitchers, kettles and dining couches*

^b Isaiah 29:13

^c Some manuscripts *set up*

^d Exodus 20:12; Deut. 5:16

^e Exodus 21:17; Lev. 20:9

It is apparent that it is best to look upon these citations from Scripture as statements containing exaggeration to draw attention to certain aspects of the Pharisees’ doctrines and practices—not a blanket endorsement or condemnation.

CONCLUSION

Since this investigation is about the *divorce sayings* in the Synoptics and Pauline accounts, it seems appropriate, once more, in concluding this study, to draw attention again to the “exception clause” in Jesus’ teaching on divorce. One finds the teaching of divorce in its absolute form in three instances and also with the exception clause in three—two by Jesus, one by Paul. The following charts set forth the “absolute forms” as well as the “exception forms”:

ABSOLUTE FORM	ABSOLUTE FORM	ABSOLUTE FORM
Mark 10:11	Luke 16:18	1 Corinthians 7:10-11
He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.”	Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.	To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.
EXEMPTION FORM	EXEMPTION FORM	EXEMPTION FORM
Matthew 5:32	Matthew 19:9	1 Corinthians 7:15
But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.	I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.	But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

As stated above, Jesus accuses the religious leaders of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel (Matthew 23:24). Jesus says they swallowed a camel, period! The question is, did they? We must be careful to distinguish between the *words* of Jesus and what He meant by what He said. But in “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel,” the “words” and their “meanings” are not synonymous as to the *meaning* Jesus intended to convey. In most instances, the “words” and their “meanings” are the same, that is, a literal interpretation. For us to take

these words literally would be to lose sight of the meaning Jesus intended these words to convey.

To take words in Mark (10:10) and Luke (16:18) literally would be to lose sight of their designed purpose. To take all the assertions of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount literally would be to lose sight of His contemplated aim. **The language Jesus used in His teaching is not an end—in and of itself—but an instrument by which He seeks to convey what He means.** Should we say that one must not interpret the Bible literally? The answer is *yes* and *no*. Is this a catch twenty-two question? Dammed if you say *yes* and dammed if you say *no*! **Stein²⁸ correctly says**, “The answer to this question is that we are to take the meaning of the Bible literally.”²⁹ In other words, the *meaning* of the words and not simply the *words* themselves is to be considered in our interpretation. **We, for example, may quote what the Bible says and not necessarily give the intended meaning.**³⁰ The literal interpretation of many Scriptures would result in nonsense.

We should stop playing God with the lives of men and women. Many believers occupy the “throne of God” in their condemnation of those who do not concur with their particular brand of orthodoxy, or prevailing attitude. Some decisions have to be left up to the individual. Paul goes right to the very heart of the matter when he writes, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Romans 14:4). As we conclude, the problem of divorce and remarriage is not an easy question to deal with. When someone finds himself or herself involved with a spouse who is guilty of some “unclean thing” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 5:32; 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15), we must exercise judgment based upon biblical principles. I wish to present one more case concerning mercy taking precedence, or priority, over law.

CASE FOUR

This in-depth study concludes with one additional scenario in which sexual immorality was not involved. After you read the story, please answer the question, is this young lady bound to her husband until he commits “adultery” or “fornication”? Does the principle of *mercy* take precedence over *law*? On June 24, 1981, the Montgomery Advertiser published the following article

Woman struck by vehicle

A 19-year-old woman was struck by a motor vehicle on the Atlanta Highway Tuesday night and badly injured, according to police. The vehicle left the scene of the accident with the woman lying in

²⁸ **Robert H. Stein** was most recently senior professor of New Testament interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He previously taught at Bethel Seminary. A world-renowned scholar of the Synoptic Gospels, Stein has published several books, including *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, and *Jesus the Messiah*.

²⁹ Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 11.

³⁰ For further details concerning this concept of just simply quoting a biblical passage without regard to context, see Dallas Burdette, “Bible Speaking” in *Ensign* 18, no. 5 (May 1990).

the southbound turn lane near Fox Hollow Road, said Sgt. W.H. Pertree. Police learned of the accident when “somebody stopped” a patrol car “and told them somebody had been hit,” Lt. B.J. Cleveland said. Police did not release the name of the woman Tuesday night. A St. Margaret’s Hospital spokesman said the woman was in critical condition. The accident occurred at about 9:20. Cpl. Leion Sims said there were five or six people who saw the woman walking before she was struck, but “nobody we’ve come up with actually saw her get hit by the car.” Doctors told Sims the woman was responding to treatment, although she was still unconscious at 12:30 a.m. Wednesday. Police hope to question her Wednesday morning.³¹

Well, what does the above article have to do with “wife battering”? Is this not a story about a “hit and run” accident? This article does not tell the whole story. The next day another article appeared that revealed the whole sordid story of wife abuse. She was brutally beaten by her husband. A few years after this inhuman treatment by her husband, I talked with this young woman and obtained photocopies of her ordeal in the hospital. The pictures taken by the police at the time of the accident (actually, wife beating) reveal a tremendous loss of blood. In fact, after viewing the pictures, I wondered how one could have lost so much blood and still lived. After you read the story, ask yourself this question, should she have gone back to her husband? **If she leaves, is she still bound to him for the rest of her life since he did not commit adultery—he just tried to kill her? If she leaves, is she biblically bound to live a celibate life since he did not commit a sexual sin?** The crime scene was horrendous; the blood in the pictures covered the length and breadth of her body; she looked as if she had been in a tornado. Are you ready for the rest of the story? On June 25, 1981, the following article appeared:

City Woman Badly Beaten

A 19-year-old woman, originally thought to be a victim of a hit-and-run accident, was the victim of a severe beating, police said today. **Sandra Ann Cooper**, 135 Turner Place, was found lying in the southbound lane of the 5100 block of the Atlanta Highway about 9:30 p.m. Tuesday, according to police reports. Ms. Cooper was in stable condition in St. Margaret’s Hospital’s intensive care until this morning, a hospital spokesman said. Sgt. H.C. Norton said the young woman was improving, but doctors said she was not coherent enough to talk to police. According to police reports, Ms. Cooper was struck several times on the head with a blunt object. She also suffered wounds to the left [should be to the right—RDB], reports shows. Police found the woman after a man stopped a patrol car and said “somebody had been hit,” Norton said. Norton said police originally thought she had been injured after being struck by a motor vehicle.³²

As we reflect upon this inhumane treatment by the husband, what is your reaction? Is she bound in marriage to this man for the rest of her life simply because he did not have sexual relations with another woman? **Is this a case in which the principle of mercy takes precedence over law? Do we react against divorce as an alternative to be released from a tyrant? Is our position the same as the Pharisees that Jesus encountered?** Just how do we

³¹“Woman struck by vehicle,” in *Montgomery Advertiser* 24 June 1981. (I do not have the author’s name or page number.) Since my original writing of this essay, my journal articles have been misplaced.

³²“City Woman Badly Beaten,” in *Montgomery Advertiser* 25 June 1981. (I do not have the author’s name or page number.)

interpret the divorce sayings in the Synoptic and Pauline accounts? Would Jesus rebuke us today for our uncompromising attitude of wooden literalness in our interpretation of the divorce sayings? **Are hyperboles or exaggerations or overstatements an important element in the teachings of Jesus?** God help each of us to make the right choice with love and mercy as the guiding star.