

Paul's Paradox – Part 1 of 2

by Bill and Karen Bishop

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PARADOX - *a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality, expresses a possible truth.*

Galatians 2:16

(16) Knowing that a **man is not justified by the works of the law,** ... .

This is often construed to mean that the law is obsolete today.

Romans 7:12

(12) Wherefore **the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.**

Why is Paul concerned with the attributes of an obsolete law?

Romans 3:31

(31) **Do we then make void the law through faith?** God forbid: yea, we establish the law.

Why does Paul say this obsolete law is not void (obsolete) after all?

The epistles of Paul have been the source of heated debate throughout the years. This debate centers around paradoxical statements made by Paul – statements which seem to contradict one another. Is he heretical, hypocritical, confused, OR is he using Hebraic reasoning that we (who have a western “either/or” mindset) fail to understand? Paul commonly uses juxtaposition in order to make his points.

JUXTAPOSITION - *act or instance of placing close together or side by side, especially for comparison or contrast.*

In this process, he presents seemingly contradictory points of view that may even seem like polar opposites. Paul then uses Hebraic circular reasoning to weave these opposing views together, forming a portrait that helps us understand how they actually relate to one another. However, because we don't understand the Hebraic way of thinking, we fail to see that picture. To the western mind, each segment of this integrated picture can appear to be

an independent statement of fact – words from the esteemed apostle that we can hang our hat on and call “a” truth. By using our type of reasoning, Paul’s epistles are then severed, his intent is disrupted, the left behind context is ignored, and the various isolated segments that are extracted are spliced together to form errant theological constructs of our own choosing. The end result is a multitude of denominational beliefs, each formed around various portions of Paul’s epistles which have been separated from their intended word pictures.

Paul’s juxtapositions may even include invalid extremes such as:

1 Corinthians 1:25

(25) Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

If we were to extract these few words and take them literally, we could actually build a doctrine that states that foolishness and weakness are attributes of God. Is that what Paul intends for us to take away from his words? Heaven forbid! This is just one of many times Paul uses exaggerated juxtapositions. This time he is comparing and contrasting God’s perfection to the inadequacies of man. The context then brings us the completed understanding that God chooses to impart his wisdom as He pleases in order to bring about His true message, and without God’s imparted wisdom man has little or nothing worthwhile to offer. While Paul is not saying that man is bereft of any intelligence, he is saying that the wisdom of the world (inherent to man) and the wisdom of God are entirely different.

We do much this same kind of damage to Paul’s intent every time we ignore his Hebraic circular reasoning. As a result, pastors today often pit grace and faith against law and works, failing to see Paul’s message that they are intended to work together for Father’s purpose to be fulfilled. Works are equated with the derogatory term “legalism”, and faith is reduced to a mere belief in the atoning blood of Y’shua (Jesus) through God’s grace. In part 2 we will go back to the first three verses quoted and correlate them with other parts of the picture to see how this comes together.