

Harmonize the Whole

(by Bob Pulliam)

We like for people to understand us correctly when we write and speak. I can't imagine God being any different concerning His word. And still there are people who think nothing of using a passage in such a way that it contradicts other clear passages of scripture. The problem is *not* that the Bible is too difficult to harmonize as a whole. The problem *is* that mankind has pet doctrines and practices that he does not want to abandon. Truth does not contradict itself, and we need to see a harmony in our understanding of the Bible as it guides us.

One example of the need to harmonize truth is seen in a comparison of Matthew 7:1 and John 7:24. Here they are together for you to compare:

"Judge not, that you be not judged."

"Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment."

One passage says not to judge, and the other one says to do so with righteous judgment. If one wants to use the passage in Matthew 7 the way it is normally used by the religious world, then the contradiction here seems insurmountable. Many want to use it as a shield against the scrutiny of truth. If you point out something out of line with scriptures in their life, they cry, "You're not supposed to judge me. Jesus said, 'Judge not!'" If you will read on in the text, however, you will find that Jesus is not referring to any and all judging. He has a particular kind of judging in mind. His reference to "judge not" is of hypocritical judgment. Of pointing out someone's fault when there is a more urgent fault deserving attention one's own life. But we are still to judge. John wrote, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (I Jn 4:1) Such cannot be done if one never exercises judgment on the teachings of others.

An Important Principle in Harmonizing Scripture...

We know that truth does not contradict truth. If two different elements contradict each other, then one or the other, or both, are not truth. If we find two passages that seem to contradict each other, we should be examining our interpretation of one or the other, or both, of the passages. Something is wrong, and it is not with the Bible. The above illustration emphasizes this well. If we interpret Jesus' words in Matthew 7 as they are commonly interpreted; we end up with what seems to be a contradiction. When we look more closely at the passage, we find that understanding it in its context clears everything up.

This is seen again in two great passages of the Bible. There seems to be a contradiction between Ephesians 2:8f and James 2:24. Here they are together for you to compare:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

"You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only."

I think you can see where the work needs to be done on harmonizing here. One says that salvation is by works, and the other says that it is not. Although it is actually quite easy to harmonize the two when the truth is known, some give up and decide that it is hopeless. It is only hopeless when you allow preconceived notions to keep your mind from the truth. If you are unwilling to yield to truth, then you will be bound and determined to let contradictions stand, or do irrational things with the Bible. Martin Luther, for example, tore the book of James from his Bible concluding that it could not be harmonized with the rest of scripture. Martin Luther could not harmonize James 2:24 because he was unwilling to see the truth about Ephesians 2:8f.

Here Is the Truth...

Salvation is not of works... Right? That's what Paul said. Now Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." (Jn 6:29) Believing on Jesus is a work, isn't it? But salvation is not of works... Right? So believing on Jesus is not necessary for salvation. Who would believe that? And yet it's the conclusion you draw if you spend no time understanding what Paul is writing in Ephesians 2:8f.

What are works? The people who allow the contradiction between Paul and James will tell you that it is anything a human to do to serve or please God. While believing would fall into that category, we know that faith is not a work under consideration in Ephesians 2. There are actually several different kinds of works mentioned in the Bible. To understand what Paul is saying, we ought to get a better grasp of this topic. Here is a partial list of works spoken of in scripture:

Works of the law [Gal 2:16](#); [Rom 9:32](#)

Works of Satan [I Jn 3:8](#)

Works for a Living [II Th 3:10](#)

Works of the Flesh [Gal 5:19](#)

Works of God [Jn 6:28f](#)

Some of these would never be associated with salvation. Others were at times in the first century, but boldly denied by Paul as saving anyone. And then there is faith (believing on Jesus). It is a work, according to John 6:29. Is salvation not of faith? To say that salvation is not of any works is to say that we are not saved by faith. So Paul said, we are saved by grace through faith, but it wasn't by faith after all. Who could believe such a preposterous thing?!

We are saved by grace through faith, but when Paul says that it is not of works, he does not mean any and all works. He refers to works intended to *earn* the benefit. Such was the way the Jews were using the law of Moses and circumcision (Eph 2:11). By the works of the law will no flesh be justified (Gal 2:16). (For a fuller discussion of Paul's intended meaning, see "[Faith Only](#)")

Conclusion...

To interpret the Bible, we must be ready to harmonize truth with truth. Doctrines that conflict with the almighty word of God are obvious errors. The word of God deserves better attention than that. It deserves an actual effort at a growing process that will hold up His word as the inspired message of salvation that it is. When you interpret the Bible, don't leave disharmony standing. They are loose ends that clearly indicate something is wrong.

