

# “The Truth is in the Tension”

BY DAVID POSEY

Many of you have heard me use the statement, “the truth is in the tension,” and have repeated it. Picture a tug of war, with two teams pulling in opposition to one another; as they pull harder, the tension builds. Sometimes, the truth is not with either “team”; it is in the tension between them.

There are Biblical statements that seem to be in opposition to each other but can be resolved through this principle. For example, we might read about men who prayed to be delivered from some difficulty and are saved. Yet, the Bible tells us that we should “count it all joy when we encounter various trials” (James 1:2) and “rejoice in tribulation” (Rom. 5:3). Which is it? Rejoice in trouble or pray and hope to be delivered from it? The truth is in the tension between these two ideas. You won’t always be delivered from trials; when they come, find the joy in them because trials can actually help you grow. The truth is in the tension between two seemingly opposite ideas.

There are many biblical statements that require an “either/or” in application; those “black and white” issues, with no gray — “all liars have their place in the lake of fire” (Revelation 21:8). Or, an elder must be the husband of one wife. There are many passages that fall into the either/or category.

But some passages are conditional, “if/then”: “if you do this, then this...” — the last “this” depends on the choice you make. But when the instruction in one passage seems to contradict that in another, look for truth in the tension between the two. Perhaps the best example of tension is between grace (or faith) and works. We are saved by grace, or faith, but we are to work. There’s a tension there that is only resolved by accepting both as true and “working out your own salvation” (Philippians 2:12-13).

This particular is burdened by *false* extremes that men have taught over the year. The truth is in the tension between the false extremes of “grace saves you no matter how you behave” and “one must obey to *earn* his way to heaven.” Both are faulty statements; the truth is in the tension.

What we *can’t* do when faced with these seemingly contradictory statements is to fall back on pat answers or, worse, explain the passage away. Pat answers are those concise, short statements that purport to give us a quick definition of a term. For example, “grace” is often defined as “unmerited favor.” That’s not a terrible definition, but falls far short of explaining the complete idea of grace as revealed in the New Testament.

Pat answers are convenient, but don’t quench the thirst of kingdom thinkers. That doesn’t mean that some teaching is not “black and white.” Hebrews 13:4 is a perfect example, among many: “Marriage is to be held in honor among all and the marriage bed undefiled. But fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” There’s no wiggle room there.

There are no questions of judgment, just a statement of fact: sex is reserved for marriage. Period.

But it's not always so easy. If the Sermon on the Mount doesn't convince you of that, nothing will. For example, Jesus says "do not resist the evil person...let him slap you, let him take your cloak, go the extra mile, give to anyone who asks" (Mt. 5:38-42). Wait: "Give to anyone who asks"?

One difficulty in what Jesus is telling us to do is in the *application* of his saying to everyday life. Application may wind itself toward two extremes: on the one hand, we may be tempted to explain it away until it means nothing; we build in so many exceptions to the word that we effectively neuter the teaching. When one takes this approach, he is hard pressed to come up with any example or circumstances in which the teaching actually *applies*.

In an attempt to avoid that obvious error, we may take a different approach. We'll just take the teaching at face value, literally, without regard to other biblical principles. Therefore, we would never resist one who means to do harm to us. That leads to conclusions that seem to conflict with other biblical principles and examples regarding protecting family and taking a stand for the truth. That approach can even lead to a ridiculous conclusion: "if your right eye offends you, pluck it out!" (I suppose there is a third possible application: we replace the "eye for an eye" law with another: we turn the other cheek but once we've turned the other cheek, gone the second mile, etc., then we can retaliate. Obviously, we've missed the point if we take that approach).

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Maybe he was onto something.

A word that describes "the truth is in the tension," is "paradox" — two ideas that seem to oppose each other. There are a lot of paradoxical statements and concepts in the Bible. Just a few: The Bible speaks of eternal life as both here and yet to come ("already, but not yet"); Paul said "to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21) yet took measures to preserve his life; Jesus said not to resist an evil person, yet Jesus cleansed the temple, pronounced woes on the Pharisees and rebuked the officer who slapped him (John 18:23). Perhaps the greatest paradox is Jesus' command in Mt. 5:48 that we are to be "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48), set against a veritable plethora of passages that tell us that we are sinners who cannot begin to approach the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

The truth is often in the tension.