

## The Bible and Jesus say What?

Luke 18:1-42

Carl Sandburg captured the human condition: "There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud." That is a paradox. They are statements that seem contradictory but are true.

They are seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statements or propositions that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true. For example, "In a paradox, he has discovered that stepping back from his job has increased the rewards he gleans from it."

Paradoxes are a unique way of communicating. Somehow, two things are put together that communicate something profound through their contradiction. Take this for example: Socrates famously said: "I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing." Which is it? Does he know nothing or the one thing which is nothing? We can not know both nothing and something!

Or what about football legend, Vince Lombardi's observation: "Once you learn to quit, it becomes a habit." We can only have a habit if we do some thing over and over, and quitters do not do that! These are head-scratchers, right? Writers enjoy paradoxes as do movies. The Bible is full of them. They are immensely important in helping us understand God, ourselves, and the world.

In my recent readings, I have been reminded that followers of Jesus must deal with the tensions of paradoxes. Or should we keep them balanced? Let's focus on paradoxes that are at the heart of Christian teaching. **Can we name a few?**

One more definition of Paradox. It is a seemingly absurd or contradictory or inconsistent statement or proposition which, when investigated, may prove to be well founded or true. Followers of Jesus believe the Bible to be infallible, without error and trustworthy. But God's Word contains many statements that appear contradictory on the surface when paired with another statement.

It is very important to understand these teachings in context, and to see how they complement one another to reveal a fuller picture of truth. But when pulled out of context, to make a point for an opinion, these snippets of Scripture can be twisted, misunderstood, and stripped of their true meaning. The nature of paradoxes is that both sides have some truth.

Richard Foster points out that some paradoxes involve keeping more than two lines of tension in tension. The doctrine of the Trinity involves three separate teachings which much be kept in undivided tension if we are to do justice to the biblical record. Only in this do we see profound unity in the Godhead. Are there other examples of this kind of paradox in the Bible?

So, let's look at what paradoxes do for us and why the Bible offers us so many. **How do they help us to live out our faith?**

Here is why we need paradoxes & why we need to learn from them. **First**, they are deliberately used for a variety of reasons. Richard Feynman says, "Paradoxes are not a conflict within reality. They are a conflict between reality and your feeling of what reality should be like."

A writer says, "The paradox is meant to illuminate the hypocrisy inherent in ruling systems that claim egalitarianism, impartiality, while erecting unjust hierarchies."

Paradoxes slow us down – if we really listen. We suspend judgment and are more open to change. We move from detached observers to involved participant. Stories, illustrations, and paradoxes challenge us to try them on.

**Second**, a purpose of a paradox is to catch our attention, draw us in, and provoke fresh thought. The statement "More with Less" is an example. It is why Jesus often used parables, stories, and made statements like, "The first shall be last." (Mt. 20:16) And, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!" (Matt. 19:24). Anyone hearing these sits up and goes, "What?"

**Third**, they keep us on our toes. Understanding the paradoxes of Scripture is not an easy task. It requires serious study, deeper thinking, curiosity, and a familiarity with the grand narrative of Scripture. As Jesus showed, in His dialogue with Satan in the wilderness, a proper understanding of biblical paradoxes equips us to counter the enemy's twisting of Scripture with the informed reply, "It is also written." (Mt 4:7).

This becomes complicated in a world driven by a sense of immediacy that influences our theological expectations. We are used to fast food, same day shipping, live streaming, and we want instant results – now! But God tends us marinate us instead of microwave us. Maturity, wisdom, and faith development takes effort, reflection & time.

It is in being open to the Holy Spirit, Bible study, and conversation, that our souls grow deep into faith and knowledge. We live in a time of incredible easy access to godly information. But so many people do not take advantage of it – and so we become dumber spiritually.

**Fourth**, paradoxes challenge us and help us to learn, especially if we pay attention to them. For example, the abortion debate, among many other political and cultural wars is silly when we reflect on the paradoxes. Many pro-life people tend to only be pro-life until babies are born. Then they do not support laws to help them, and their parents thrive. As one comedian said, they seem to want more babies to feed the military machines. They are not congruent. If only all of us could see our own inconsistencies and paradoxes and then sponsor taxes and laws that improve the lives of families and society.

**Fifth**, paradoxes keep us humble and living in mystery. We like control, to be in charge and let others think we know it all. Our culture leads us to focus on the three easy steps to – you name it. It is not an accident that bookstores were full of self-help books. Less shelf space is given today than 10 years ago, but still, our society has many systems and speakers who make a lot of money on – just do this and this to fix your problem, and all will be well for you. But we know the gut issues in life are not that simple.

Richard Hansen shares this story. A new worship attendee came to see me. A believer, she vulnerably shared some of the mud in which she was currently mired. Then she blurted out: "I got so frustrated at the church I used to attend. Everything was five easy steps! I need to hear something more than pat answers." Many people are recognizing that a steady diet of "how to" preaching has left them spiritually anemic.

With maturity, reflection, experience, and time, we realize that the deeper we get into reality, the more numerous will be the questions we cannot answer. Sometimes there are quick simple fixes, but usually life is not simple or easy. That is because situations have histories and we each have hang-ups & emotions. Plus, we must realize that life and living is more than just about me.

It is easy for preachers and religious leaders to tell how much Christianity will help us and how good it is for society. We have been led to forget that following Jesus is not a patent medicine. If Christianity is untrue, then no honest person will want to believe it, however helpful it might be; if it is true, every honest person will want to believe it, even if it gives them no help at all.

Raising questions that might not have easy answers; leaving the security of the homestead to venture deeper into life's wilderness, beyond the sight lines of reason into the mystery of God, would seem to be the kiss of death to attracting church members. What preacher in their right mind would raise thorny questions when people already have too many burrs under their saddles? But that is what Jesus and scripture often does! When pat answers no longer satisfy, paradox paradoxically, can reach the depths of the soul.

This leads us to the **sixth** reason the Bible gives us paradoxes. They drive us to dependence and faith in our Creator. That was the original sin. Not eating the apple or listening to the Devil – but wanting to be like God so we would not have to depend on a Savior.

The law of the Christian life is a paradox. It is made up of seeming contradictions. All its teachings are contrary to people's common

opinions. We are so familiar with them that it's good for us to step back and reflect. According to this law, giving is receiving; scattering is gaining; holding is losing; having nothing is possessing all things; dying is living. It is those who are weak who are strong. Happiness is found when it is no longer sought; the clearest sight is of the invisible. And, "God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are." (I Cor 1:28) Is this a comment about necessary workers and covid? YES!

We accept these truths by realizing that God knows everything fully and understands reality, though we do not. Isaiah 55:8 tells us: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord." Often what we think makes sense, does not in God's eyes.

The New Testament has a parallel to this wisdom from Isaiah. The Almighty's paradoxes are why Paul says: "Oh, the depth of the riches & wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments & how unfathomable His ways." (Romans 11:33)

God wants to take us deeper than we can imagine, fill us up more than we can visualise, and enrich us in ways we cannot fully conceive. And paradoxes are part of this plan. Because following Jesus is both simple & clear, but we need God working in us. He wants to fill us up with heavenly values, traits, and habits, beyond our own capabilities and even desires.

Paradoxes keep us grounded in our dependence on God. There is nothing scarier than a religious person who is so absolutely sure they are right on an issue, that they drop other key parts of faith. It does not matter what religion it is. Paradox prods us to ask hard questions of ourselves. They reveal and yet hide, assert yet invite reflection. "The last shall be first, and the first last" asserts a truth, but prompts me to ask: Am I thinking and acting in ways that make me "first" or "last?"

If we try too hard to explain paradoxes, they lose their experiential, experimental and investigative value. Snappy applications are insufficient when

dealing with Jesus' & the Bible's use of paradox, which only works when we are transformed in our depths, or using a metaphor, below the waterline, by God's love and power.

Our text for today from Luke 18 gives us plenty of food for thought. The persistent powerless **poor widow** gives us an example of prayerful hope with courageous fighting for impossible justice, from an unjust ungodly judge. Why should she even bother? What do justice and faith have to do with each other? It's a key Bible theme that asks us, "Do we work as hard for justice & risk as much as the widow so when the Son of Man returns - he finds such faith?"

And on the surface the **parable of the tax collector and Pharisee** is clear. But the paradox goes threatenly deep to the core of our beings. People who think they are good will be declared unrighteous by God, and people who declare their unrighteousness will be declared righteous by God. The parable asks us to consider: Do I think I do not need the Savior's grace?

Since paradoxes are in God's Word, and Jesus uses them, they must be true. As followers of Jesus, we are obligated to wrestle with and believe them. Where, except from Satan, do people get the idea we understand all things? And remember, Jesus wants all of our being, from the inside out. That is where the most important work is done. Then we become salt and light for the world and God's Kingdom.

Holding up **children**, is absurd! But when we watch them grow, they have an astonishing sense of wonder and at times wisdom. A few months ago, my daughter read the Bible's Love chapter - I Corinthians 13. Her daughter, age 4 with a skeptical face said: "Yeah, we can't do that."

Mom asks: "Why not?"

Daughter: Takes Bible, turns it to the front and asks. "Did you forget mom? The peaceful kingdom is broken because they ate from the tree."

Mom: "Yes, well we still must try to act in love. We will make mistakes, but it is still our

responsibility to do our best.”

Daughter, age 4: “Its haaaaarrd to follow God.”

A few days later the same 4-year-old had a temper tantrum. When she calmed down, one of the things Dad shared with her is Ephesians 6:1-4 which include: “Obey your parents.”

Then the girl goes to her mother and says sorry. Her mother accepts the apology. But then the 4-year-old daughter hangs around – expectantly.

Her mother asks: “What do you want?”

Daughter: “I’m waiting for you to do your part?”

The puzzled mother asks, “My part?”

Daughter, age 4, says, “Aren’t you supposed to not provoke me? So, apologize!”

Oh—the joys & wonders & insights of children! Clearly more work needs to be done. The child needs the teaching explained to her. And the mother needs to reflect on her own behavior.

We all should be familiar with the **next paradox** of warning. “Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is **rich to enter the kingdom of God.**” I am sure we have read and heard about this often. Jesus definitely had the disciples attention!

Then next, in verses 31-34, we are told despite hearing about **Jesus dying** for the third time, the disciples did not understand. They had no common reference for this message. But this teaching gave them something to reflect on later. How could a Messiah be treated this badly?

Last, we have a typical Jesus story of **blindness, healing, faith, with no one listening to the man except Jesus.** It is a great paradox. “Receive your sight, your faith has healed you.” What? How do those two go together? we ask.

These stories from Luke illustrate how going into the Kingdom of God, & living in it, goes against our grain. It is counter intuitive. It reminds us of how we are expected to treat the most powerless among us. “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little

child will never enter it.” We are to be as persistent in faith in unjust situations as the prayerful widow. We are challenged about how we see ourselves and our religiosity. We are to be cautious of wealth altering our faith. Do we really understand what Jesus did for us? We may be blind but are we really blind in faith?

Like a tuning fork, harmonious paradoxes declare their truth when two sides of the paradox vibrate in unison. This requires care and honesty.

One of the most difficult paradoxes is between **divine sovereignty and human responsibility.** The story of **Job** highlights this. Job for no good reason he or we can figure, suffers greatly. But Job keeps both tines vibrating: God is both transcendently all-powerful and personally involved. Refusing to mute one tine is what allows Job to argue with God. And does Job give us an example of how to argue with God?

Ultimately Job realized no simple solution is possible. The paradox opens the heart door to a mysterious and unsearchable and uncontrollable God. He ends up declaring, "Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (41:3).

Living in this paradox clarified for Job whether his faith was in God, or in what he knew about God. In the end, it is significant that Job cries out, not "I understand," but "I repent" (Job 42:6).

I hope something similar happens with each of us. As we process life, it is good to question timeless truths about God. I have always been a little reluctant to respond when someone says, “God is good,” with “All the time.” But I still hope and believe it is true, for me & for the most destitute refugee, addict, and sinful politician.

I hope over time, our questions are answered but even more - point us to faith and mystery. Like Job, we need to realize that faith, and ultimately each of us rest only in God, not in understanding God. Mystery reveals, even as it obscures. We somehow come to know the Almighty Creator better when we acquiesce to God's mystery.

This seems to be what happened to Job. At the end of his wrestling with God, Job admits God is unfathomable but also, paradoxically, indicates that he now knows God better than he did before: "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5).

Intellectual debate can be an avoidance method. Job like personal circumstances can devastate believers who have never explored the wilderness beyond easy, five-step answers that satisfy ourselves. But regular exposure to paradox challenges Christians early on to exchange faith about God, for faith in God, a God who is trustworthy even if inscrutable. What a relief to realize that both tines of the paradoxical tuning fork are necessary for the admittedly elusive note of truth, and even grace, to be heard!

And one last paradox from Paul. "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed - not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence - continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." (Philippians 2:12-13)

If you look at life differently than most people, and if others think you are a walking paradox, congratulations! Maybe that is a mark of authentic discipleship.

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### **Some Biblical paradoxes:**

Romans (3:28) tells us, "We are justified by faith apart from works of the law." But James (2:24) informs us, "We are justified by works and not by faith alone."

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger." (Matthew 5:6) and he said, "No one who comes to me will ever be hungry." (John 6:35)

Self-fulfillment comes only through self denial. But the most certain way to miss self-fulfillment is to pursue it. Jesus said, "Those who find their lives will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39)

The Bible affirms both the goodness and the limitation of material things. And we receive lots of warnings about misusing wealth.

The Bible reminds us – we are in the world, but not of it. Jesus said, "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world." (John 17:6) How can we be both here on this earth and not here?

What do we do with the apparent contradiction of "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works." (Mt 5:16) and, "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them." (Matt. 6:1)

Here is another paradox. Is the Christian life easy or hard? Jesus taught, "My yoke is easy." (Matt 11:30). But he also warned, "How difficult the road that leads to life." (Mt 7:14). So which is it?

A common Biblical paradox is: In 1 Peter (5:6) we read, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time." We see the same thing in James (4:10). "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." This is counterintuitive.

And one all Christians struggle with. "He, Jesus, the Deliverer King will be named ...Prince of Peace," by Isaiah. (9:6). But Jesus says, "Do not assume that I came to bring peace." (Matt 10:34)

Why does a God of love, harden Pharaoh's heart? Pharaoh hardens his own heart as the story begins (or it "is hardened" in the passive voice?). Following the sixth plague, however, Pharaoh seems to lose his nerve, so God steps in, hardening his heart for him. "The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh." (Ex. 9:12)

Who was the better Jesus follower? Martha or Mary? The main lesson of the story seems to place emphasis on giving attention to Jesus over our own busyness. But this story continues to baffle Christians today who believe in doing, in service, in working hard for Jesus; that is the way to be a good disciple.

And, God is both imminent & transcendent – in the created order & beyond the created order.