

It's Up to You. No It's Not.

DAVE BAST

In this series of programs, we are considering a number of apparently contradictory texts. That is, different passages of scripture that seem to cancel each other out. Here is an example: Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. That is one of Jesus' best-loved invitations from Matthew 11:28; but here is something else he said on another occasion: No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them. That is John 6:65. So, which is it? Can we come to him or can't we? Stay tuned as we try to figure that out.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. This is part of our series – it is number two, actually – in what we are calling the contradictory texts. There are a lot of places in scripture where you have to balance one teaching off from another or give added nuance or something to a particular doctrine; but there are several places where, in a very startling way, one verse seems to say one thing and the other seems to say directly the opposite, and that is what we are having fun with, really, dealing with those.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes you expect it in scripture; for instance, anybody who has spent any time at all reading through the book of Proverbs knows that you can, with relative ease and sometimes in the same neighborhood of Proverbs, you can find contradictory proverbs: Answer a fool in his folly and he will shape up; or do not talk to a fool at all; it will not do any good anyway. Which is it? Well, you expect that in Proverbs because wisdom has to fit all of the different situations in life and it takes wisdom to apply wisdom, so you need lots of different proverbs for lots of different situations. But, you do not expect Jesus to say seemingly opposite things. In the last program, we had Jesus giving peace to his disciples: I leave you with my peace; but then there is another passage where he says to the disciples: You think I came to bring peace? Nope; I came to bring conflict. Well, what is up with that, Jesus? Now, today, it says: Come to me. You just come – I am inviting you to come; and then, on another occasion: Well, you cannot come unless the Father has been working, doing something else; otherwise, forget it. So, again, which is it?

DAVE BAST

Let's start with the invitation side of things, because the Bible is replete with statements that simply urge people to turn to God; to come to God; to come to Jesus, specifically; to believe. They are all different ways of saying: Put your life in God's hands. Turn away from your sin; turn toward him. So, you think of one of the very last verses in the Bible, this wonderful scene in Revelation 22, where it says:

¹⁷The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

From that, there is an old hymn: Whosoever will, may come; and it is really from that Revelation verse. The one who wishes; all you have to do is want it: Whoever wants it; just come.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have these texts which sometimes are called the well-meant Gospel offer. The invitation to come; the altar call, if you will; come to me.

DAVE BAST

And God is not kidding here. I mean, he is not being deceitful. It is not as though he is giving with one hand and taking away with the other; if you come you will find that. You will get what he promises. God does not speak out of both sides of his mouth. He will actually give anyone who comes the rest and the peace and feed the hunger and satisfy the thirst. It seems as though in these passages that we have been pointing out, the only thing you need is need. The only requirement is a sense of your need; the sense that you are thirsty; that you are missing something; that you are weary; you are tired of trying to do it yourself; of the burden of your own sin or guilt or whatever you want to call it. All you need is that sense of need and you can turn. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ; you know the famous scene in Philippians...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Seek and you will find...

DAVE BAST

Right. The Philippian jailor, "What must I do to be saved?" and Paul says, "Believe. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ."

Scott Hoezee;

Yes, and of course, the most famous text in the world; people unfurl banners of it at football games and baseball games to this day. John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his son that whoever would believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life. So, it is a wide-open invitation; a wide open call; and on the human level, we have to believe that that is so. People can respond and will respond to that Gospel call to conversion.

DAVE BAST

If there is one thing that we can say for certain from the Bible, it is that God's love, God's offer of salvation, is issued indiscriminately; in the old sense of a word, indifferently; without distinction; without paying attention to people's class or race or nationality. It is for anyone and everyone without qualification. There is no group that is excluded. There is no one who cannot come.

Scott Hoezee:

Right; and again, all through the Bible you see... you can go back to the Old Testament and to the Psalms, and how the psalmists who wrote those poems were again saying: Come! Come to God! All you nations clap your hands. Sing to God; everybody join the choir. And again, purely from a practical standpoint of humanity, that is the way it has to be. If we do not preach, if we do not invite them; if the call is not given – nobody can ever come to a party if they do not know what is going on by having gotten an invitation – so the invitation must be made, and the scriptures assure us that that is an invitation that people are able to respond to.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you just made me think of one of Jesus' famous parables, the parable of the great banquet or feast where the invited guests do not come; a lot of them have excuses; so, the master sends his servants out and he says: Go out into roads and the streets and the alleys and wherever; just round them up. Get anyone. Grab anyone who is available. Indiscriminate; that is one great thing about this.

The other side is the sense that if you do not come – if you choose not to believe – if you reject Jesus, it is really on you. That is not God's fault. There is an old hymn from, early American actually, a colonial hymn called *Mercy's Free*, and the chorus goes like this: Though mercy's free, our God is just; and if a soul should ere be lost, this will torment the sinner most; mercy's free, mercy's free. It is the sense like, if somebody is lost, in the end they are going to realize: Oh, my goodness; it could have been mine. Mercy was freely offered. I chose to reject it. It is my responsibility.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And yet, to speak a contradictory word apropos to our series, one of the biggest theological questions, and one of the biggest theological divides and arguments that have come up in the last century, and really, all through the history of the Church is, can a human being be credited with having made the right decision in responding to that call? Isn't that the equivalent of saying that person is choosing on his own to go to heaven? What about grace?! What about sin?! That is what we need to take up next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are talking about the contradictory texts of Jesus saying on the one hand: Come! Come to me and I will give you rest. And on the other hand, saying: Nobody can come unless the Father enables him. It is that part; what is going on in that saying of Jesus – and there are others like it – what is going on with that? How do we bring together on the human level the well-meant offer of the Gospel, as we said in the last segment, and the need to invite somebody; and yet, wondering where is God in all of that? What is going on behind the scenes and is there theologically something really, really important we need to acknowledge in terms of how it is we get saved by virtue of accepting the well-meant offer?

DAVE BAST

Let's turn to an example in the Gospels of people who actually started rejecting Jesus; not only did not come, but chose to turn away, and it is found in John Chapter 6. It is the follow-on to the miracle of Jesus' feeding of five thousand at one time, and Jesus took that opportunity in John 6 to follow up with a sermon about the bread of life – the bread of heaven – a wonderful image, which he used to describe himself; and toward the end of that, he said, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you cannot be my disciple," which was pretty shocking, as you can well imagine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

People were offended.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they were deeply offended. "What?! What is he talking about?!" From our perspective later and our understanding, of course, of the Lord's Supper and the symbolism of that, we understand it. It is a deep faith connection with Christ, where we are really united with him and he with us; but here is what happened, as John describes it in John Chapter 6:

⁶⁰On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching; who can accept it?" ⁶¹Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before? ⁶³The Spirit gives life. The flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you, they are full of the Spirit and life; ⁶⁴yet there are some of you who do not believe," for Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. ⁶⁵And he went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them." ⁶⁶From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

So there it is. Jesus knows who is going to believe. He has known from the beginning who believed and who did not. Only the power of God, God the Father through God the Spirit working in the human being, can enable anyone to turn to Jesus, to come to Jesus, and this is Jesus himself who says this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What we are getting at here, and what Jesus is getting at here, and what preeminently in the New Testament the Apostle Paul will wrestle with, particularly in Romans, but also in Galatians and other key passages that talk about this – what we are getting at here is what is the "natural" state, or rather we could call it the

unnatural state of humanity once we fell into sin; once Adam and Eve at the head of the human race; once what we call the fall into sin took place, things happened. Everything was affected, and that has left the human race in a certain condition. Of course, in the Protestant Reformation, but really Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology teaches the same thing, what we end up concluding is we became dead in our sins. I remember a teacher of mine in high school used to make the analogy in terms of where is the human will? Where is human free will in all of this? He said, “You can think of humanity after sin as either a really sick dog or a dead dog.” If we are just sick; if the dog is sick, you can call and you can whistle and you can call, and the dog might be able to pull himself up and crawl across the room and come into your lap if he is sick. If he is dead, you can call all day and he ain’t gonna move, because the dead do nothing for themselves; you just have to do everything for them, right?

Theology has said it appears from scripture that we are the dead dog; and so, the call alone, just the call on the horizontal plane of human life, could never be enough. Something else has to happen to make the dog alive before it can even respond to the call.

DAVE BAST

Right. Here is, I think, a pretty straight-forward way of putting the problem. Whoever will, may come; the Bible says whoever will may come; but what if we will not? What if we cannot will to do that? It is an invitation for us to think more deeply about our own nature; and not to try to project this outward on others theoretically, but I think about myself; why is it that my will is so crippled; so crippled that if I follow and accept scripture’s testimony, I would never choose God. I am not capable of doing that. Yes, in some degree I have a free will. The Bible is not deterministic like that. I can choose to have oatmeal this morning for breakfast. I can decide which clothes I am going to put on. I can choose to do this or that, to turn right or left when I take my car out of the driveway in the morning; but on the deepest level of life – and especially when it comes to choosing God – my will is in bondage; it is in bondage to sin, it is curved inward; I only end up choosing sin.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Some people know that the Reformed tradition, and particularly the Calvinist Reformed tradition is sometimes summarized through the five points of Calvinism TULIP; and a lot of people think that the T of tulip – the first big teaching of Calvinism in the Reformed tradition is “total depravity” – and they think that means, “Oh, you are saying people are as depraved as they could possibly be.” Actually, that is not what it stands for; that all came out of a teaching, a confessional document called the *Canons of Dort*, and the first letter of the tulip is “total inability,” that is what it really is teaching, and what it means is, we are totally unable to save ourselves, including on our own unable to say yes to the call. So, what Reformed people, and what a lot of people say is Billy Graham and his Crusades back in the day when Billy Graham was young and healthy; he makes the call: Come to Jesus. Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling and just as I am, they sing, and people stand up and they come forward, and on the human level, it looks like: I have decided to follow Jesus, as the old song says, but what the Bible says, and what Jesus is saying in John Chapter 6 is, something is going on behind the scenes. Their heart got started by grace before they responded to the call, or else they would not have been able to.

Dave Bast:

Listen again to what Jesus says here, ⁶³“The Spirit gives life. The flesh counts for nothing,” which is to say, it comes from God, it starts with God. The work has to start somewhere.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is all God.

DAVE BAST

The work of salvation has to begin somewhere. It either starts with God or it starts with us, and according to Jesus, no, it starts with God. So, without that we are left helpless. The one thing I think we have to reject – and the Church has always rejected this – this is not just Reformed people – it is not even just Protestants – it goes all the way back to St. Augustine in the early church, and before him to Paul. There was a teacher by the name of Pelagius who said he basically was saying, “Look, it is up to you. You have free will. You make the

choice.” It is like the classic way of putting it: God votes for you; Satan votes against you; you cast the tie-breaking vote. Christians said, “No, it cannot be that way. That is not what the Bible teaches.” It has to begin with God, and so, ultimately this is a mystery that we do not fully understand, but we ascribe salvation to him [Jesus].

Let’s try to put those two ideas together of we need to come and we are responsible if we do not, but God has to give us the grace to enable us to do that. Let’s try to do that in just a bit.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*. We are wrestling right in the middle of it all, one of the biggest questions of Church history; human freewill, human choice versus God’s actions behind the scenes; which is it? The evangelist makes the altar call; invites people to come forward; people get up out of their pews and say, “I have decided to follow Jesus,” but is that the end of the story or, as we have been suggesting, is God active behind the scenes in ways we cannot see, but that end up being decisive. How does that go together? That was the question you left us with, Dave. How do we fit those two together? It is a mystery, so let’s not pretend we can solve it, but we can at least think a little bit about how those two things go together.

DAVE BAST

Well, we come down, clearly – I think the Bible does – on the side of sovereign grace. Of God being the prime agent in anyone’s salvation. I think that is true, not only from the teaching of scripture, but even from our own experience. You stop and think, “Did I really contribute something to my salvation? Was it really me?” I think of all the wonders that God has done in my life; the privileges I have had; the advantages I have had, and I think any Christian, if they are honest, is going to give the glory to him. They are not going to claim that it was because I was smarter or I was better or I was holier or I somehow had the shrewdness to see through. No, it is all to the glory of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

How vast the benefits divine, which we in Christ possess. It is not that we went out and found them ourselves; and for a lot of Christians across the ages, this is not just a theological, philosophical point, although it is that, and there are huge philosophical debates on free will and all that, or how did God create us and how did we fall into sin and how do we get out of sin? But, it is not finally that. For a lot of believers – I think for a lot of us, a lot of the beauty of the Gospel; a lot of the lyric power of the Gospel is right here; because what happens if you make sin less of a big deal? If you make sin something that we can, on our own initiative, at least get the ball rolling. I can choose to respond to the Gospel. I can do that without any help from God because sin, maybe, is not quite – it does not have that big a grip on me after all. What happens when you do that is some of the power of Gospel and some of the color of the Gospel gets drained away; and so, we have always said it’s a beautiful thing that God has to be the one to start our hearts. That is a beautiful thing because it points to the lyric power of his love and his grace.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes. The natural reaction is then, “Well then, how can anyone be responsible? If God has to do it and God does not do it and somebody...”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Is the game fixed or rigged?

DAVE BAST

Yes, how can they possibly be held responsible? I do not know, frankly, but I think they are because I think scripture also teaches that; and that is where we fall back. Calvin used to speak often of God’s inscrutable justice. We know that God does right. We know that God is just and fair. We know he is not going to condemn anyone unfairly who never had a chance. We do not see how it all fits together, but we leave it there. The chief thing, though, is when we understand that our salvation is his doing and the glory goes to

him, it benefits us in some incredible ways, really; it does us so much good. The first thing it does, really, is it keeps us humble. There is no ground for boasting. Paul said, “God forbid that I should boast, save in the cross of Christ, through which I have been crucified to the world and the world to me.”

I love what John Newton said once – you know, the Amazing Grace guy, John Newton – he said of others: Well, maybe you could contribute something to your salvation, but I know that is far beyond what I could do. It gets us low and makes us recognize, “I did not really do this and I have no reason to feel superior to anybody.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And yet, there is that mystery, too; that once God gets the heart started, and so forth – and then we respond to the call – and then we go on to live our lives – there is a wonderful combination of God and us working together. I heard somebody make the analogy once of let’s say you heard a brilliant violinist playing with a symphony orchestra and it was some Bach concerto or something that had a very, very challenging violin piece, and the violinist played it perfectly. Now let’s say you got to talk to her afterwards. Well, sometimes with a musician you will get one of two reactions. You can say, “Oh, thank you for that performance tonight,” and she will say, “No, no, it was all God, all God.” Then you want to say, “Yeah, but it was your fingers on the fret. You are the one who was holding the bow.” On the other hand, if somebody said, “Yes, thank you. That was all me. Yes, I am very...” Then you would want to say, “Well, I think...”

DAVE BAST

Where did the talent come from?

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is both, right? It is all God and yet it is all you. You are involved with this. You are there when the wheel goes around. So, it is a mystery, but it is one that again just inspires further humility and greater gratitude and greater awe; that indeed God is working in us and with us and through us to get this whole program of salvation accomplished.

DAVE BAST

Right; and the other thing is... you bring up a good point: it does not mean that we do not have to work as well. This does not make us...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Cooperate, yes.

DAVE BAST

Right. This does not make us fatalistic, believing this; that it is all God’s glory and it is all God’s work. It makes us active. It does not mean we do not have to share the faith with others; that we do not have to evangelize. It does not mean we do not have to pray – oh, it is all predetermined, you know; foreordained – no. God told us to pray. God told us to witness. So, we get busy doing what he has told us to do. He told us to obey. He told us to come; so just come. And when you look back, maybe you will realize, “Oh, he enabled me to do that, and I give him praise and glory for it.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com and tell us topics, passages, or themes you would like to hear next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/its-up-to-you-no-its-not>

Printed on August 16, 2025

