

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: Sin By Command

When it comes to seeming discrepancies and problems in the Scriptures, one of the more interesting and unique is that of “sin by command.” That is, there are times in the Bible when God seems to directly command a person to do something which could be considered a sin. This sort of command seems a difficult one to understand and deal with, and it is this type of contradiction, wherein the sinless God commands one of His followers to do something that seems sinful, that we will consider in this article.

In case my readers are not familiar with the sort of passages I mean when I mention God commanding someone to sin, we will consider some of them. Look, for example, at Hosea 1:2.

2. When the LORD began to speak by Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea:

**“Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry
And children of harlotry,
For the land has committed great harlotry
By departing from the LORD.”**

Certainly, we would not consider it wise to marry someone who had been a prostitute, and certainly not wise to marry someone who still was involved in this activity. But beyond unwise, such an action would seem to be downright sinful. When we consider the fact that “harlotry” in the Bible is often used as a symbol for idolatry, this gets even worse. Here was a woman who was probably an idol-worshipper and a prostitute, for the two usually went together. Surely it could not be right for any Godly Israelite to marry such a woman. Yet here the LORD commands Hosea to do this. Why would He do such a thing?

Another example of “sin by command” is found in Ezekiel 4:12.

12. “And you shall eat it as barley cakes; and bake it using fuel of human waste in their sight.”

Human waste was considered unclean, and eating food cooked on human waste was something no Israelite should do. Yet here the LORD commands Ezekiel to do this! Ezekiel protests and gets the LORD to substitute cow dung for human dung (Ezekiel 4:14-15,) but this does not change the fact that the LORD seems initially to have commanded Ezekiel to sin.

The same charge could be brought against the Lord in Acts 10, when, confronted by a great sheet full of all kinds of unclean animals, Peter is commanded, “**Rise, Peter; kill and eat.**” (Acts 10:13b) Why would the LORD command Peter to do something Israelites were forbidden to do? Let us consider these strange circumstances in order.

Hosea Marrying the Harlot

First, we have the strange command of the LORD to Hosea. If we would consider the context, we would see that the LORD had a message to convey through the actions of Hosea. Hosea was writing

in an idolatrous time, if we compare the time element given in verse 1 with the record of the book of Kings regarding the kings in whose reigns he prophesied. The actions of Hosea in marrying a prostitute were to symbolize the LORD's relationship to Israel, a people whom He had espoused to Himself, yet who had prostituted themselves with other gods. This becomes clear when we consider Hosea 2.

**2. "Bring charges against your mother, bring charges;
For she is not My wife, nor *am* I her Husband!**

**Let her put away her harlotries from her sight,
And her adulteries from between her breasts;**

**3. Lest I strip her naked
And expose her, as in the day she was born,
And make her like a wilderness,
And set her like a dry land,
And slay her with thirst.**

**4. "I will not have mercy on her children,
For they *are* the children of harlotry.**

**5. For their mother has played the harlot;
She who conceived them has behaved shamefully.**

**For she said, 'I will go after my lovers,
Who give *me* my bread and my water,
My wool and my linen,
My oil and my drink.'**

**6. "Therefore, behold,
I will hedge up your way with thorns,
And wall her in,
So that she cannot find her paths.**

**7. She will chase her lovers,
But not overtake them;
Yes, she will seek them, but not find *them*.
Then she will say,**

**'I will go and return to my first husband,
For then *it was* better for me than now.'**

**8. For she did not know
That I gave her grain, new wine, and oil,
And multiplied her silver and gold—
*Which they prepared for Baal.***

**13. I will punish her
For the days of the Baals to which she burned incense.
She decked herself with her earrings and jewelry,
And went after her lovers;
But Me she forgot," says the LORD.**

So the LORD intended this odd behavior on the part of Hosea to illustrate what He was having to put up with in His relationship with Israel. The figure is extended in Hosea 3.

1. Then the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman *who is loved by a lover and is committing adultery, just like the love of the LORD for the children of Israel, who look to other gods and love the raisin cakes of the pagans.*"

There is controversy here as to whether or not the woman spoken of here is the harlot Hosea married in chapter 1, Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, or a different woman. Some have tried to make the word translated "lover" here, *rea'*, mean "husband." Out of 188 occurrences of this word, it means "neighbor" or "fellow" (as in one like you) most of the time. In some of the occurrences, it indicates a closer relationship, and is translated "friend." Only three times is it used of lovers. Twice it is used in the Song of songs (Song 5:1 and 5:16,) but it seems to be pointing out the close

friendship or companionship between these two lovers, and therefore it is doubtful that the word means a married couple. Moreover, the couple seems to be betrothed, but not married here. Jeremiah 3:20 then is the only other time it might be translated “husband,” as it is in the *New King James Version*. **“Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, So have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel,” says the LORD.**” Yet this could just as easily be translated “Surely, as a woman treacherously departs from her friend, so have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel.” There is no reason to make it be referring to a husband and wife here. In fact, considering the moral state of Israel at the time, the LORD might be quite deliberately using the word here, since there were many women in Israel living with men who were “friends,” not husbands at all. Probably the old *King James* translation of “friend” in Hosea 3:1 cannot be improved upon. I would lean toward the fact that this is not Gomer, but some other woman that is being spoken of.

The question then is who this woman is? We cannot know for certain. Apparently, she had been loved by Hosea before she became an adulterer (idolator.) Perhaps Hosea had originally been going to marry her before he was commanded by the LORD to do otherwise and marry a prostitute. I am certainly speculating wildly here, but Hosea being commanded to do this instead of marrying her might have led her to feel bitterness against the LORD, and led her to turn from Him to idolatry.

Whatever the case regarding this female friend of Hosea’s, it seems that Gomer is now out of the picture. Whether she died, which seems quite possible, or whether she left Hosea, we cannot say. But at this point the LORD commands him to love his friend, this woman who has now become an adulteress. She has not only fallen into idolatry, but also into slavery, it seems, as we read from the next verse.

2. So I bought her for myself for fifteen shekels of silver, and one and one-half homers of barley. 3. And I said to her, “You shall stay with me many days; you shall not play the harlot, nor shall you have a man—so, too, will I be toward you.”

Hosea is commanded to buy her out of slavery, and to keep her for himself, urging her to remain pure for him until the time they come together. If I am correct in my speculations, what must have started out as a very sad story for this couple comes to a happy and even romantic conclusion.

The point of this latter part of the story is explained in Hosea 3:4-5.

4. For the children of Israel shall abide many days without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without an image, and without an ephod, and without teraphim: 5. Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; and shall fear the LORD and his goodness in the latter days.

As Hosea wins to himself this woman he loved but who had gone astray from him and from God, so the LORD promises that in a future day a future Israel, in spite of their past sins, will turn to Him with sincerity, and they will enter into relationship with Him once again. So the story of Hosea, and the command to him to sin by marrying a prostitute, were for the purpose of teaching this important lesson. Thus we see the reason for the LORD commanding Hosea to do this, although we still have not explained how it is the LORD could have commanded someone to sin.

In this regard, I would point out that the law never commanded a man like Hosea not to marry a harlot. It forbids fathers from making their daughters harlots, as we see in Leviticus 19:29.

29. ‘Do not prostitute your daughter, to cause her to be a harlot, lest the land fall into harlotry, and the land become full of wickedness.

A priest was forbidden from marrying a prostitute, as is clear in the commands to priests in Leviticus 21.

1. And the LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron...

7. They shall not take a wife *who is a harlot or a defiled woman*, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for *the priest is holy to his God*.

14. A widow or a divorced woman or a defiled woman or a harlot—these he shall not marry; but he shall take a virgin of his own people as wife.

Lastly, a woman who was married and found to have been impure before marriage was to be executed.

21. then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done a disgraceful thing in Israel, to play the harlot in her father's house. So you shall put away the evil from among you.

This clearly had not been done to Gomer, as Israel was not following God's laws as they should have at this time. Yet this is all we can find in the law regarding harlotry. As long as Hosea was not a priest, then, it was not actually a command for him to sin when the LORD commanded him to marry a prostitute. So while marrying a prostitute might be considered unwise, it did not actually violate any of God's laws. As bad as it appears on the surface, God's command to Hosea is not actually an example of "sin by command."

Food Cooked on Human Dung

Moving on to Ezekiel being commanded to eat food cooked on human dung, the word for dung here is the Hebrew *gelel*, which is used only four times, and seems to indicate a ball of dung. This word we cannot confirm is unclean, but we do know that there is uncleanness that comes from humans from Leviticus 5:3.

3. Or if he touches human uncleanness—whatever uncleanness with which a man may be defiled, and he is unaware of it—when he realizes *it*, then he shall be guilty.

This verse indicates that to touch human uncleanness is to become guilty. The verse does not clearly say that dung is human uncleanness, but this seems clear from Deuteronomy 23:12-14.

12. "Also you shall have a place outside the camp, where you may go out; 13. and you shall have an implement among your equipment, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and turn and cover your refuse. 14. For the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and give your enemies over to you; therefore your camp shall be holy, that He may see no unclean thing among you, and turn away from you.

Moreover, to be defiled in this way was considered sin, as is made clear from Leviticus 5:5.

5. 'And it shall be, when he is guilty in any of these *matters*, that he shall confess that he has sinned in that *thing*;

Sin here clearly means "to miss the mark," and not to do something immoral, as we would tend to think of the word. Nevertheless, this is called "sin," and Ezekiel is therefore told to sin by command when he is told to cook his food on human waste. What, then, should we say about such a command?

Ultimately, I think our answer to all these issues must stem from this fact: that obeying the LORD is ultimately the greatest good, and disobeying Him the greatest sin. Samuel expresses this truth to Saul in I Samuel 15:22-23.

22. So Samuel said:

**“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
As in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to heed than the fat of rams.
23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,
And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
He also has rejected you from being king.”**

Whatever good the law might have a man do, then, the greatest good is to obey the voice of the LORD, and to rebel against Him is as the worst of sins. I would suggest, then, that obeying the word of the LORD is ultimately man's first duty, and trumps any other consideration. If the LORD, then, commands a thing, it is always going to be a far greater sin to disobey Him than any sin that might be involved in the command. To do what the LORD says to you, moreover, is always more important than what He might have said to others in the past.

Having made this last statement, however, I want to emphasize the fact that God has ceased speaking directly to men as He did in the past, and today speaks to His people only through His Word. Let no one say that he disobeys the Word of God because he has received some direct revelation from God that trumps it. This is the excuse of a scoundrel!

Not only so, but I would emphasize that regarding things like clean and unclean foods, these things were from the beginning not a moral issue, but were only righteousness or sin because God had commanded these rules in the first place. The Lord makes this clear through Paul in Romans 14:14.

14. I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

Paul makes it clear that nothing is unclean of itself, which means that nothing is inherently unclean. Therefore, the reason some foods were clean and some were unclean was just because God said so. He gave the command, and this made things clean or unclean. From the time God said it, it was now unclean, and to eat what God had said was unclean was therefore a sin. God, however, could change this at any time, and things that had been declared unclean could be declared clean again.

Now God did not actually tell Ezekiel that the food he was to eat cooked over human dung was going to be clean for him. In fact, the point of the illustration God was making through Ezekiel's actions depended on these foods being considered unclean, as we can see in Ezekiel 4:13.

13. Then the LORD said, “So shall the children of Israel eat their defiled bread among the Gentiles, where I will drive them.”

Yet the fact remains that the LORD had commanded Ezekiel to eat this unclean food, and to obey the command of the LORD could never be considered a sinful act. The reason Ezekiel should not have eaten such food before this time was because the LORD had commanded against it. Now, since the LORD had commanded him to do it, it would have been just as right for him to eat this food as it would have been wrong for him to eat it prior to this command.

We cannot ignore the fact that Ezekiel never actually ate bread that was defiled by cooking it on human waste. Yet the reason is because Ezekiel begged the LORD not to force him to do this. We can see this in Ezekiel 4:14-15.

14. So I said, “Ah, Lord God! Indeed I have never defiled myself from my youth till now; I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has abominable flesh ever come into my mouth.”

15. Then He said to me, “See, I am giving you cow dung instead of human waste, and you shall prepare your bread over it.”

This does not prove that it actually would have been wrong for Ezekiel to eat bread cooked over human dung, however. What this shows us is that the LORD is a God Who is in relationship with His people. He is not hard and unmoving, having determined everything that is to be in advance, and never wavering from it. Rather, He is a God Who hears the requests of His people, and is willing to change His plans or make a substitute, at least in certain cases, when they request it. The LORD acquiesced to Ezekiel’s sensibilities, and did not make him cook on human dung. This does not change the fact that it would have been fine for him to do so, however, since the LORD had commanded it.

Peter’s Sheet Full of Unclean Foods

Similar to this last story is that of Peter and the unclean food in Acts 10. The complete vision Peter had is outlined in Acts 10:9-16.

9. The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. 10. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance 11. and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. 12. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 13. And a voice came to him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” 14. But Peter said, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” 15. And a voice spoke to him again the second time, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” 16. This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.

Peter is shown unclean animals in a great sheet and told to eat them three times. When he refuses, just as Ezekiel did, based on the fact that he had never done such a thing before, the Lord corrected him all three times with this word, **“What God has cleansed you must not call common.”** This declares the very thing we argued in Ezekiel regarding clean and unclean things. It was because God declared a thing unclean that it was unclean in the first place. If God changed the command and declared a thing clean, then that thing became clean, and it would be a lack of faith to continue to declare it unclean. This is the very thing God has done with unclean meats today, though that was not the point of His message to Peter, but rather that God was declaring certain Gentile men clean. That all meats are now clean is the message of I Timothy 4:4-5, however, written to us in the dispensation of grace.

4. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; 5. for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

Therefore all meats are clean for us today, and let no one say that they are not!

So we have covered our first three occurrences of seeming “sin by command.” We saw in the case of Hosea marrying a prostitute that this was not technically a sin, though she certainly was a sinner deserving of death, and this was at least unwise. Eating food defiled by human waste was a sin, but only because God had made the rules regarding clean and unclean meat, not because there was something inherently immoral about eating food thus defiled. God had made these rules, and if God said to break them, then what He said cannot be sin. In fact, to obey God’s commands can never be sinful. To disobey God, no matter how questionable His orders may seem, is, on the other hand, the ultimate sin of rebellion. Thus we must obey God no matter what.

We will go on to consider other examples that seem to be “sin by command” in our next article.