

Thinking Biblically requires us in the Western World to think in a different culture. It's not that some of what is written is not understandable in our culture but there is so much more to understand if we can just let ourselves reach into the Middle Eastern mindset.

If you have seen the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, you may remember that the father, Tevya, had an amusing habit of approaching every issue with "*On the one hand... but on the other hand....*" This distinctly Jewish habit of looking at things in terms of two contrasting viewpoints is a part of their Eastern thinking culture and often the two points of view are left unresolved and simply accepted as a paradox. We Western Christians, however, often struggle to find systematic treatment of every issue, and become frustrated when the Bible sometimes seems to contradict itself. Rather than trying to make the Bible meet our logical standards, we will have a better understanding if we learn to look at it from multiple points of view.

Many of the most important truths of the Bible are paradoxical. God is both omniscient, but yet he is present at certain times in a unique way. Jesus is both fully human and fully God. God is loving and in control, and yet he allows tragedy and injustice to take place. Jesus' words often come in paradoxes. He says that "*if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last*" (Mk 9:35) and that "*he who loves his life will lose it, while he who hates his life will keep it for eternity.*" (Jn 12:25)

When we find a paradox in the Bible, we are often are tempted to resolve the conflict by rejecting one side or the other. One such paradox that has divided Christians for centuries is whether or not humans have free will or whether our actions are predestined. Some groups reject free will entirely, and consider us only as puppets in God's hands. Other groups reject the idea that God is in control, seeing a God that is wringing his hands and hoping that everything will come out right in the end. Many congregations have been divided and become impotent over these issues.

The Rabbis answer was simply, "*God foresees everything, yet man has free will.*" Their observation and conclusion was that passages in Scripture actually support both points of view. The Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and yet God hardened his heart. (compare Ex 7:3 & 8:15)

The rabbis don't try to resolve them into one idea, they simply embrace the two ideas in tension with each other. By doing this they are being true

to the text by not ignoring passages that don't fit their theological understanding. They see that only God can understand some things.

One Jewish way of comprehending contrasting truths is to put them into a parable. For instance, God describes himself as both slow to anger and forgiving, but yet he says he will punish the wicked to the third and fourth generation. (Ex. 34:6-7) Some have concluded that the God of the Old Testament was full of judgment, but now only loving, since Christ died for our sins. But, if we read more closely, we find that neither is the case.

God forgave the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf, but then forbade Moses, his greatest prophet, from entering the promised land because he struck the rock. Likewise, Jesus spoke about the coming judgment more than anyone else in the New Testament, yet he told the woman caught in adultery that her sins had been forgiven. He said, "Woe to you, blind guides!" but later said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

How can God be both just and merciful? Possibly He reasoned that if He creates the world on the basis of the attribute of mercy alone, it would be overwhelmed with sin; but if He creates it on the basis of justice alone, how could it possibly endure? Therefore He created it with both of the attributes of mercy and justice in tension with each other.

This doesn't explain why God is merciful sometimes and why he chooses to judge at other times; it merely points out that both are needed in order for God to reign over His creation while allowing it to survive.

Besides being a wise approach to looking at the nature of God, this also illustrates the "both sides" approach of Judaism as to how we should live. It points out that a blend of mercy and judgment is often what we need in our lives. Parents struggle with this balance of enforcing rules along with showing grace to their children; not being too strict, yet not letting their kids run wild. When our spouses do something that hurts us, should we forgive them and let it slide, or, should we bring our hurt and anger to their attention?

Christians tend to think that there must be only one right way to act in these situations. Either to never let sin go unpunished, or always be forgiving. But the reality is that we need to have discernment and balance.