

Preacher's Pen points

A Free What?



Driving by the bank the other day I was puzzled by a marquee ad: “Free biscuit when opening a checking account”. My first question was to ask, “Did I read that right?” My second was, “Why would any bank offer a biscuit to a prospective customer?” Was this a promotion for the extremely hungry who could be wooed into the bank for nothing more than a biscuit? There had to be more than meets the eye. Later the clarification came in a local paper ad where “biscuit” appeared. You see, in this case a “biscuit” is not a piece of bread, but a plush toy dog in the likeness of the NBC Dog “Biscuit”.

Words Have Meaning Only in Context

The word “biscuit” could not be understood properly without putting it in context. The word “biscuit” itself has several definitions. If my wife says, “we’re having biscuits for breakfast”, I wouldn’t think of plush dog toys. If I told you I was putting Larry and Karen Miller’s bookshelves together with “biscuits” you surely would not think of something you could eat. (For those who don’t know, a biscuit is a flat oval piece of wood commonly used in joinery). If I said the tile in someone’s bathroom is “biscuit” you would need to think of a color. You get the idea.

In a similar way, one of the challenges we have in studying the Bible is making sure we understand the meaning of words in their context. Failing to do this can result in serious misunderstanding and application of God’s word. Consider this example.

“By Works” or “Not by Works”

In Eph. 2:8-10 Paul reveals that salvation is “*not by works*”; however, James seems to contradict

this view by saying, “*You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone*” (Jas. 2:24).

When one fails to consider the context and plugs in an arbitrary and incorrect definition of “works” such as “human effort” or “obedience to God” into each passage, one would surely be confronted with a contradiction. Martin Luther, making this interpretive mistake, opted to accept the words of Paul and call James’ letter “an epistle of straw”.

Yes, It’s both!

However, the resolution is to be found in defining the word “works” in its context. In the Ephesians passage, as well as Romans 4:1-4 where he makes a similar affirmation, Paul uses the word “works” in the sense of perfect obedience to law or a sinless life. His point is that all have sinned (Rom. 3:23) and therefore cannot earn righteousness by perfect obedience to law. James, on the other hand, is addressing the nature of the faith that saves. He contends that faith that does not act is “*dead, being by itself*” (2:17). Thus, he affirms that a man is justified by “works”, that is, “obedience to God’s law that express faith”. The apparent contradiction is easily solved when each verse is viewed in its context and the appropriate meaning is assigned to each word in context. We cannot earn salvation by perfect keeping of law. However one’s faith must be obedient to God to be the faith that saves.

Study Carefully!

As you study the Bible beware of this danger and look closely at the contextual use of words before reaching a judgment about a passage’s meaning. Now, would you like a “biscuit”? ;>)

—Johnny Felker (www.truthchasers.com)