

Things That Cannot Be Done; Things That Are Impossible

This is a study of the words "cannot" and "impossible," mostly from the New Testament, as used in the New International Version. Such words are not typically chosen for a word study, but as will be seen, they can be very instructive. Many of the verses that use these words will have little significance for our study, and will be omitted. In other instances, these words will lead us to verses that people often want to ignore. They will lead us to a message that goes contrary to the "comfortable religion" that many people want, which allows them to ignore the requirements Jesus gives to those who would choose to follow him. We discover that such verses *do* exist... and we are forced to either acknowledge them, or to willfully close our minds to them.

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About Scripture, and our attitude toward it -

John 10:35b ... the Scripture *cannot* be broken

Jesus applied this basic fact to an Old Testament passage that some people have difficulty understanding. Yet the very fact that it *is* Scripture means that it *cannot* be broken (whether or not we understand it). Throughout the Bible, we learn - both directly and indirectly - that Scripture is always considered to be true and authoritative. It *demand*s our acceptance and judges us if we choose to ignore it.

You can "break" Scripture, in the sense of ignoring what it says or disobeying its commands. But Scripture warns us that if we *do* disobey it, there will be consequences... and that warning about the consequences *cannot* be broken. Ignoring Scripture or disobeying it does not cause it to stop being true.

About God, and our response to him -

We are often told that God can do anything, and that nothing is impossible for him to do. Scripture itself says this (see Luke 1:37; 18:27), *yet this applies only to things that are consistent with his nature and will*. There are some things that God *cannot* do.

Hebrews 6:18 ... it is *impossible* for God to lie

This fact should influence our attitude toward God. Because of this, God can (and must) be completely trusted. We have a moral obligation to accept as true anything he says, because he *cannot* lie!

One of the things that God tells us is that we have all sinned, and because of this, have placed ourselves under his wrath. We *deserve* his judgment, for God is holy and righteous. Consider this verse:

Habakkuk 1:13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you *cannot* tolerate wrong.

God has provided a way out of our hopeless situation, but we must come to him on *his* terms, not *ours*. Salvation is possible only if we are willing to change the way we think and act (repentance), and trust Jesus Christ, who makes those changes possible. He died for us so that we could die to our old way of life; he came back to life, so that we could live a new way of life. For those who have this change, he guarantees their eternal life, for *he now has power over death itself*.

Acts 2:24 God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was *impossible* for death to keep its hold on him.

Romans 6:9 ... since Christ was raised from the dead, he *cannot* die again; death no longer has mastery over him.

Because he was sinless, his death was able to pay (atone) for our sins, so that those who are willing to trust him can be saved. Because he is now alive, he is able to raise from the dead all who are willing to trust him and become his followers. (As we will see later, a "follower" is someone who follows in word, thought and action, not one who merely *claims* to be a follower.)

About people who are not Jesus' followers -

If you are not one of Jesus' followers - also called "disciples" - these things apply to you:

First of all, you must realize that your own efforts - including your "religious activities" - will not get you into God's favor, nor will they break down the barrier that currently exists between you and God. Even the Old Testament animal sacrifices - though important in their context - were neither intended, nor able, to bring eternal salvation to the people.

Hebrews 10:4 ...it is *impossible* for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Numerous Old Testament verses show us that such sacrifices weren't God's primary desire, even though they were necessary at that time. (See for example, Psalm 51:16-17.)

If you have not become one of Jesus' followers, you are under God's wrath. It is of utmost importance that you change your ways and attempt to do what pleases God - rather than doing what *earns* his wrath. This change is what is meant by the word "repentance," and in the Bible, it is inseparable from the concept of "believing." If you genuinely believe something, it *will* influence your thoughts and actions.

Part of that change has to do with your attitude about *God*. You must be willing to *trust* (or *believe*) him - not only the fact that he exists (as revealed in the Bible), but also the fact that he will deal with you according to your actions. Otherwise, you will *never* be able to come out from under his wrath and begin to please him.

Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is *impossible* to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

The word "faith" has to do with trusting God, or believing what he says (the Bible).

You also need to change your attitude about *sin*, for you *cannot* get away with it. If you try, it is the same as *mocking* God, who has warned you that there is a coming judgment for sin. If you choose to think differently and ignore the warning of Scripture, you are merely deceiving yourself, which is a rather stupid thing to do.

Galatians 6:7 Do not be deceived: God *cannot* be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

God defines what *is* and what *isn't* sin, in his Word, the Bible. We must pay attention to the Bible (which *cannot* be broken) and accept what God says (since he *cannot* lie), or we will *never* change the way we think and act. We will go on in life with a distorted perspective, perhaps even convinced that our own way of life is a *good* way of life.

Without God's Word, you cannot even know how sinful you are.

Sin has blinded your heart and mind, so that you *cannot*, by nature, understand the Good News of salvation. This is not because of any deficiency in the Good News, but because of the blindness of your own heart and mind. Consider this passage:

2 Corinthians 4:4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they *cannot* see the light of the gospel [the "good news"] of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

You *need* the Spirit of God to change the way you think. Otherwise, you will *never* understand the things of God.

1 Corinthians 2:14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he *cannot* understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

How can you get this to happen? First of all, don't look for a "feeling" of some type, induced by an emotional or "religious" experience. The Holy Spirit doesn't come by means of "feelings."

John 3:8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you *cannot* tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

If you are willing to acknowledge your condition - which means a willingness to find out how the Bible describes your condition (and then accept it as true) - you are headed in the right direction. Pay attention to what God says, without adding to it or subtracting from it - and let God do the rest. He will send the Spirit, and enable you to change. In reality, if you are actually beginning to do these things mentioned above, it is a good sign that God may be *already* working in you!

Now, suppose you decide to ignore these things, or to put them off until later ... what danger is there for a person who chooses to continue in sin? First of all, you are still controlled by your "flesh" - the habits and inclinations that are a part of your sinful nature. Under this condition you remain unable to please God.

Romans 8:8 Those controlled by the sinful nature *cannot* please God.

Second, you should consider what may happen to you. There are many Scripture passages - both warnings and examples - that warn us that God will harden the hearts of people who willfully choose to ignore him - especially when they have been exposed to the truth. God holds us accountable for the truth we have received, so the more exposure you have to the truth, the worse-off you will be, if you choose to turn your back on it. As we have already seen, having such an attitude is like mocking God, who has warned you of the consequences... and you cannot get away with that!

Do not "pick and choose" which parts of Scripture you want to hear. You must accept *all* of what it says about you and your condition. Many people like to hear about the love of God (such as in John 3:16-17), but God's love is available *only* to those who come to him on *his* terms. Otherwise, you are *already* under his wrath (such as in John 3:18-19). In the end, if you do not turn to God, you will remain forever an enemy of God - and it will be something *you* caused to happen. God is holy and pure, and sin *cannot* dwell in his presence. So, if you choose to remain in sin, it is as though you were *personally* thrusting yourself out of God's presence.

Psalm 5:4-5 You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked *cannot* dwell.
The arrogant *cannot* stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong.

It's your choice!

About people who are Jesus' followers -

If you claim to be one of Jesus' followers, how do the rest of us know that your claim is true? (After all, the Bible does warn us that there will be *many* counterfeits.) Do we assume your claim to be true, simply because you *insist* that it is true? Or do we find out what the Bible says about the matter? It is much wiser for us to look to Scripture (which *cannot* be broken) and to believe what God says (since he *cannot* lie), than to blindly accept the words of a human, who (like all humans) is capable of all kinds of lies and deception - including *self*-deception.

If you are a *genuine* disciple (a follower of Jesus), there are certain things you *cannot* do. It's not just that you *shouldn't* do them (though that is true), but you are *not able* to make them your lifestyle. This is because, if you have become a disciple, God now dwells in you and he *changes* you into something new. You will still have struggles and temptations, because of all the sinful inclinations and habits that you learned in your "old" life, but those things will no longer be the desire and craving of your heart.

If you are a disciple, you *will* accept the Scripture passages mentioned below, simply because they are in the Bible (which *cannot* be broken) and because God (who *cannot* lie) said it. If you don't accept them, it's because you aren't really a disciple, regardless of your claims. It's as simple as that.

First of all, there are a number of things that are so incompatible with discipleship, that they *cannot* be done. To do them is simply an indirect way of claiming that you *aren't* a disciple - and in this matter, your actions speak louder (and more truthfully) than do your words.

You *cannot* maintain a sinful lifestyle. This fact is expressed in several ways, and is perhaps the main theme of verses that use concepts such as "impossible" and "cannot," when used to describe a disciple.

Consider the following verse. What does it tell you about a disciple's lifestyle?

1 John 3:9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he *cannot* go on sinning, because he has been born of God.

This includes even sins that people tend to view as "small." For example, you might not consider hatred to be as bad as murder - after all, you aren't *killing* the person. True, *he* might not die from your hatred... but what effect does it have on *you*?

1 John 4:20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, *cannot* love God, whom he has not seen.

Read "the Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5 - 7). If you don't already know it, you will discover that even your *thoughts* and *attitudes* reveal whether or not you are a disciple.

You can have only one master. You *cannot* follow God and something else. Consider these verses:

Matthew 6:24 (See also Luke 16:13.) No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You *cannot* serve both God and Money.

1 Corinthians 10:21 You *cannot* drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you *cannot* have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

Luke 14:26-27, 33 (See also the context.) If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he *cannot* be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me *cannot* be my disciple. ... In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has *cannot* be my disciple.

If you are a disciple, proof of it *will* become visible, sooner or later. The fakes will also be recognized for what they are. They may not like this fact, and will claim that you have no right to acknowledge their fakeness - in other words, to "judge" them. Yet it is *God* (who *cannot* lie) who not only says that fakes *can* be recognized, but who also *commands* us to watch out for them. So when we choose to *not* recognize them, we have chosen to ignore part of God's instructions to us - something a disciple is unwilling to do!

Here is a passage that mentions the fact that *fakes* can be recognized. The verse listed below (which contains the word "cannot") gives the basic principle. Its application to fakes, and the command for us to watch out for them, is found in the context (vs. 15-27) - which you should also read.

Matthew 7:18 A good tree *cannot* bear bad fruit, and a bad tree *cannot* bear good fruit.

Below are some verses that focus on the application of that same basic principle to *disciples*. They, too, will be recognizable. One of the verses is a command (which genuine disciples will want to obey) and the other is a statement of fact. Both *duty* and *lifestyle* are mentioned in these verses.

Matthew 5:14 You are the light of the world. A city on a hill *cannot* be hidden. (The command - an application of this fact or principle - is found in v. 16.)

1 Timothy 5:25 ... good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not *cannot* be hidden. (A reference to fakes is found in verse 24.)

In the Scriptures, there are *many* promises given to the followers of God - those who are genuine disciples of Jesus. A few of the passages contain the words we are observing in this study ("cannot" and "impossible"). Consider the following thoughts:

God has begun a good work in us. Suppose we accidentally fall into sin. Obviously, it won't become a lifestyle, for that would contradict the very nature of a disciple. But if we *do* fall into sin - even though it's temporary - does that mean our salvation is in danger of being lost? No! God is the one who is working to accomplish our salvation, and he won't stop what he has started. More than that, he has brought us into his kingdom and made us a part of his own family. He is so close to us now, that to disown us would be almost like disowning himself!

2 Timothy 2:13 ... if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he *cannot* disown himself.

Since God is at work in us, he will make sure that we don't turn sin into a *lifestyle*. He may discipline us, or he may allow us to reap the horrible consequences of our sin (which could even be physical death). He may do lots of different things... *but he won't allow us to keep on the slippery path into habitual sin.*

A disciple's future is secure. He *cannot* be kept from all the good that God has in store for him - not even by the "evil one," the devil himself!

1 John 5:18 We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one *cannot* harm him.

God has many things in store for us - things that will last forever. What we have now is temporary; the things in store for us are permanent, built on a solid, immovable foundation. This fact *must* (and will) influence the way we live!

Hebrews 12:28-29 ... since we are receiving a kingdom that *cannot* be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire." [Verse 29 is a quote from Deuteronomy 4:24.]

The phrase "let us" is a *command*, not just a nice suggestion.

Obviously, we have a wonderful future to look forward to. *But we are not there, yet.* We need to live in the "now," and we need to live the way God intends his followers to live. As we do our living, there are two things we must never forget: 1) we *need* God, and 2) we *need* each other.

First, we need God, and we need him constantly. Without him, we do not have the power to do what we know we should do. Each of us has an "old nature" that fights against us, and we need God's power to overcome it. The following verse describes what it is like, when we try to live without God in control. It shows us that even the apostle Paul had a constant need to rely on God.

Romans 7:18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I *cannot* carry it out.

We can be thankful that the above passage doesn't end until verse 25, which focuses on the solution to our dilemma!

Concerning our need for each other, the following passage gives us a basic principle, using parts of a human body to illustrate it. Its application to us, as followers of Christ, can be found in the surrounding verses.

1 Corinthians 12:21 The eye *cannot* say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head *cannot* say to the feet, "I don't need you!"

People who belong to God are described as a *body*. God did not make us to live as though we could survive without a close interaction with other disciples. We belong to each other; we need each other. It is a rejection of God's Word - something a disciple will not do - to try to live without interacting with other disciples. We are one and we must work together as one. God (who *cannot* lie) tells us in his Word (which *cannot* be broken) how this is to be done. The true followers of Jesus will try to do it. (The fact that so few "church-goers" try to do it merely illustrates how few in number the *genuine* disciples are. It does not nullify the truthfulness of verses such as these!)

One last passage. This is about people who have been influenced by the truth, and the truth seemed to have a positive effect on their lives; yet later they turned their backs to the truth they had once received. This verse warns us about the danger of doing so: Such a person may reach the "point of no return," after which will *never* be *capable* of returning to God. It shows us that salvation is a serious matter!

Hebrews 6:4-6 It is *impossible* for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

This passage is a warning - both to the person who abandons the way of salvation, as well as to the rest of us.

We must go to *Scripture*, to find out what *is* and what *isn't* the "fruit" (or characteristics) of salvation. There are many characteristics that people mistakenly think are "proof" (such as those mentioned in this passage), yet Scripture shows us that even *unsaved* people can have them. An unsaved person *can* have an awareness of the truth - so does the devil! He *can* experience many of the benefits of associating with disciples - at least to some degree.

People *can* have this much exposure to the truth without ever being saved. They may look good on the surface, but they have never become changed at the *heart* level! Perhaps we could describe them as having a "skin-deep salvation" - one that has no effect on their hearts and minds. As we read further in this passage, we discover that there were things missing from the lives of these people - the things that *are* associated with genuine salvation (v. 9, for instance).

The fact that fakes *can* have characteristics that look good is mentioned in many places throughout Scripture. Yet the apostle John reminds us of something that we should never forget: The very fact that they eventually leave is *proof* that they never actually were one of us (1 John 2:19). They were just fakes.

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This study has been based on the words "impossible" and "cannot" (in the NIV translation). There are many other passages that are similar to those listed above. You can find them by looking in a Bible concordance for words and phrases that express similar concepts, such as "never," "will not" and "does not." This is easiest to do with a computer-based concordance, which allows searches not only for words, but also for phrases.

Be aware that many of the verses you might find will be of the "unpopular" type that typical "church goers" do not want to hear. This is because the typical "church goer" is not a disciple, but just a "church goer." You, however, have the opportunity to *accept* the Scriptures (which *cannot* be broken), because it is the Word of God (who *cannot* lie). You have the opportunity to be a *disciple*, not a "church-going" *fake*!