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Paradox and Its Relationship to Christianity:

Understanding God’s Call

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**Introduction**

Deciding on a topic for my honors thesis was no easy task. When I first began to brainstorm ideas for my thesis during the beginning of last fall semester, I thought that it might make sense to center my thesis around mathematics, which is my major. For a brief period, I considered researching the connection between mathematics and faith. Over time, this idea became less appealing to me. I then considered writing about how prayer has enhanced my relationship with God. I later decided against this idea, too. Towards the end of last fall semester, I was starting to get frustrated with myself because I could not decide on what to write about for my thesis. I knew the deadline was fast approaching and that it was time to pick a topic. One night, as I was reflecting on the semester and my time at DeSales, a topic that I felt was worthy of a thesis finally struck me. During my reflection, I considered how I have grown in my Christian faith at DeSales and that through growing in my faith, I have become more open to God’s mysteries and have embraced that the Truth is not always as clear as it initially seems. Accordingly, I will detail different paradoxes I have encountered and explain their relationship to Christianity in this thesis.

Over the course of my life, I have come across many paradoxes. These paradoxes, many of which are mathematical or logical, have piqued my curiosity. However, it was not until my time here at DeSales that I gave paradox considerable thought. At DeSales, I have grown in my Christian faith by attending Sunday Mass and discussing faith with different professors and fellow peers. I have also developed in my faith as a result of the different theology and philosophy courses I have taken at DeSales, some of which have been a part of the Faith and Reason Honors Program. As I have studied and reflected on Christian teachings, it has occurred to me that Jesus tells us a lot about paradox.

The Truth is something we all long for, and I am no exception. Since I was young, I have continually searched for the Truth and given it great thought. When I was younger, in my search for the Truth, I felt that it was necessary to rationalize everything. I always needed some sort of explanation; if I could not quickly conjure up some logical explanation, I quickly dismissed the idea. However, as time has passed, I have recognized that not everything has a logical explanation. Additionally, I have learned that I cannot always rely on my intuition. Although I believe our intuitions can help guide us, we cannot use our intuitions as our only means of judgment. In fact, when we rely too much on our intuitions and think that our intuitions will provide us with all the answers, then it is easy to go down a dark path. Instead, in conjunction with using our intuitions, we must learn to listen and trust Christ in all things. We must do our best to put ourselves in His presence. When we do so, He humbles us and offers us the opportunity to learn something new.

In placing my trust in Jesus and putting myself in His presence, I have given myself the opportunity to experience many paradoxes. In experiencing these paradoxes, I have found that I am reluctant to embrace many of them, at least initially. However, as I have given myself more time to reflect on them, I have had an easier time embracing them. As I have given paradox greater thought, it has occurred to me that paradox has biblical roots. In fact, there are so many examples of paradox in the Bible that it seems to me God has a proclivity for paradox. Why might this be? To me, it seems that although God wants the Truth to be knowable, He also wants it to be somewhat mysterious. After all, if every answer was in plain sight, there would be much less of a reason for us to put our faith in God. However, because the world is so full of mystery, it leaves room for both faith and humility. Having reflected on these ideas, I have reached the point where I not only embrace paradox, but I use it as a guide for the way I live.

**What is Paradox?**

The origin of the word paradox stems from the ancient Greeks. The Greeks took the prefix *para*, which means “contrary to,” “beyond,” or “outside of” and combined it with doxa, which means “opinion” (“Paradox”). Paradox was first taught at the ancient Greek School of philosophy at Elea around 500 BCE (Dowden). Parmenides and his student Zeno produced many famous paradoxes that still perplex philosophers today. Some of their most famous paradoxes include The Divisibility of a Line, The Millet Seed, Achilles and the Tortoise, and The Arrow. These paradoxes have little relation to the ones I will be discussing; and so, I will not explain them but will suggest that they are intriguing and worth researching on your own.

Paradox can be defined in several ways. However, it can best be defined as “a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true” (“Paradox”). In other words, a paradox is a statement or proposition that, although goes against our intuitions, has legitimacy or truth to it. Although there are certain types of paradoxes that are self-contradictions, the ones I will be discussing are not contradictory at all. Whereas, by definition, a contradiction can never be true, the paradoxes I will discuss all have truth to them. These paradoxes are called “veridical,” meaning that the result produced seems absurd but is actually true; whereas, Zeno’s paradoxes and many that relate to mathematics are called “falsidical” because they establish a result that both seems false and is actually false. In these paradoxes, there is some sort of fallacy in the underlying demonstration. This occurs, for example, in the proof that 1 = 2, which wrongly relies on the assumption that we can divide by zero (“Paradox”).

**Why Does God Use Paradox?**

As I previously suggested, it seems to me that God has a liking for paradox. There are several reasons why I think this may be, and I will offer a few. The first reason is that paradox makes us more open to the world around us. If paradox was not so abundant in our world, we would be much surer of ourselves. To a greater extent, we would rely on our intuitions and believe that we would be able to discover the answers to the world by ourselves. However, God does not want this for us. God does not want us to rely solely on ourselves in the process of making discoveries and searching for the Truth but wants us to be open to Him and the world around us during this process. Furthermore, He wants us to be open to our life experiences and trust that they will guide us to the Truth. Through paradox, we are less inclined to shut ourselves off from His great creation.

Another explanation for God’s tendency towards paradox is that He uses it as a check on our pride. Many times, when we think we know the world and what will come next, God throws us for a spin. Consider the COVID-19 pandemic that has been thrown at us, for example. When God throws us for a spin, we realize our precognitive abilities are not as good as we had thought; and so, we are humbled. When we are proud and think we have all the answers, the reality is that it makes it more difficult for God to enter into our lives. In fact, pride puts a wall between us and God. After all, if we could intuitively know everything there is to know about the world and accurately foresee what is to come, then we would have no reason for God. Because God wants a relationship with every one of us, He uses paradox to get us to see that we need Him in our search for the Truth.

Yet, another reason for paradox is that God wants balance in the world. If the world was not paradoxical, it would be nearly impossible for there to be any sort of stability. For example, consider what our society would be like if we continually achieved greater amounts of satisfaction with each thing we ate. If this were the case, we would never stop eating and our society would be unable to function as a unit. Similarly, consider the end result if people were able to achieve increasingly greater amounts of happiness with each dollar they spent. If this were the case, then it would be unlikely that there would be any giving back to the poor, or to those in need. The wealth that people would accrue would completely dominate them; and so, they would continue their pursuit of wealth without any consequence. Society would be consumed by greed, and the result would be a very unjust society. Of course, as the reader, you may suggest that our world is corrupted by greed right now. My answer would be that it is, but a functional society still exists because most of us have some sense of the paradoxes that serve as a check on us. Of course, despite this sense of the paradoxical nature of things, we still have difficulty in embracing paradox; and certainly, this difficulty is the cause of much of our society’s instability.

**The Paradoxes**

***1. The Paradox of Freedom***

Negative freedom is the freedom from the coercion of government and others (Essig). Naturally, it would seem that having this type of freedom is a good thing. Having this type of freedom implies that we are “free” to do whatever we want because we do not have to listen to what others want us to do. However, in possessing negative freedom, we may become addicted to that thing we want; and we have then become enslaved to that addiction. As a result, once we think we have become free, we have become slaves. It is when we are able to exercise our freedom from our internal impediments, i.e., addictions, that we will have achieved positive freedom (Essig). It is easy to see why so many “free” people end up becoming enslaved. Many will look for pleasure once they are told that they can do what they want. However, over time, the pleasure that once satisfied the individual will not be enough. He or she will then look for more pleasure. After a certain point, this pleasure will not be enough, and the cycle will continue (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky 678). This idea is known as the hedonic treadmill, which is defined as “the observed tendency for us to return to a fairly stable level of happiness after significant positive (or negative) events” (“Hedonic Treadmill”). For many people, because they need more and more of something, this can lead to addiction. At the moment the person is addicted, he or she is no longer free but is enslaved because he or she is dependent on whatever the addiction may be. The addiction may take over the person’s mind; and so, it is no longer the person that is in control, but it is the addictive thing that is in control of the person. Scripture echoes the overarching theme that accompanies addiction, as it reads, “I have the right to do anything,” you say-but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”- but I will not be mastered by anything” (*Holman Rainbow Study Bible: Holy Bible, New International Version*, 1 Corinthians 6:12). In other words, it is ultimately what we decide to do with our freedom that defines us.

An example of the concept laid out in the previous paragraph is what is happening to us as a result of technology. Technology, which we think frees us up to the world around us and provides us with so many great opportunities, has enslaved so many of us. For instance, there are times when we know it is best to put our mobile devices away, whether it be when we are at our jobs, we are studying for an exam, or we are trying to get some sleep; but instead of putting our devices away, we stay on our devices because we are slaves to the information they feed us. As a result, our devices are not freeing us up to the world around us but are, in fact, doing the exact opposite. According to a recent 2019 study conducted by global tech company Asurion, Americans now, on average, check their phone 96 times per day, which is the equivalent of once every ten minutes. Asurion also conducted a similar study in 2017, and the company found that the number of times Americans checked their phones in 2019 relative to 2017 was 20 percent greater. Yet, the study also found that close to half of Americans are now trying to curb their phone use, with 68% of people aged from 18 to 24 saying that they are making the effort to do so (“Americans Check Their Phones 96 Times a Day”). This is alarming because it shows that although many people are aware of being too dependent on their phones, they are still unable to break their habits. Knowing this, there is no doubt that it is not the person who is in control of the phone, but it is the phone that is in control of the person.

Our technology enslaving us, rather than freeing us, is just one example of how our increased perceived “freedom” makes us less free. Another example stems from our “freedom” to consume alcohol. Needless to say, when people decide to consume alcohol, they may overindulge, and their cognitive and coordination abilities are hindered. As a result, they become less free in what they are able to do. Meanwhile, a child may be happy upon convincing their parents to let them eat cookies and ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; but if the child acts on this freedom, he or she would not be free at all but would be limited in what he or she could do because of the health problems that would ensue. The lesson is that when we abuse our freedoms, we are not free at all. It does not mean that being free in the literal sense is a bad thing; but what it does mean is that we must be careful in how we use the freedom that is given to us. Only when we use our freedom wisely and moderately will we become more free.

Before moving on to the next paradox, I want to touch on the idea that the paradox of freedom arises as a result of our pride. Future addicts, when beginning to pursue pleasure through something worldly, will think they will be able to exercise control when necessary. However, exercising control is much more difficult than it initially seems. The problem, as I have discussed, is that the addicted person is not in control; their addiction is in control. Before looking to pursue happiness through the pleasures of this world, it is important to consider this point long and hard. Ultimately, we may think that we are in full control when the reality is that we are not; and so, the very thing that God vehemently warns against, i.e., pride, is largely responsible for this paradox.

*The Takeaway:* Nothing material on this Earth will be able to satisfy us. Because we will always be searching for more, we must be careful with how we use our freedom. We are made for the infinite; but because this world is finite, this leaves a gaping hole in our hearts (Hulse). Thus, we cannot look to our freedoms to satisfy us but must trust that, with time, God will fill this hole with His infinite love and mercy.

***2. The Paradox of Wealth***

One of the most notable paradoxes that I have experienced is the paradox of wealth. This experience is not direct experience as a result of coming from a wealthy family but is experience I have gotten by observing wealthy individuals. Despite my lack of direct experience, I have given this paradox a lot of thought and consideration, and I believe my observational experience has taught me what I need to know. Although the paradox of wealth can be defined in a number of different ways, I am suggesting it is the idea that beyond a certain point, a greater amount of wealth does not bring greater happiness. In other words, I am proposing that there is not a positive relationship between wealth and happiness beyond a certain income level. This means that the relationship between the two variables could be negative or constant, depending on the person and how they use their wealth. In the following paragraph, I will focus on showing why, at the very least, happiness levels are constant beyond a certain amount of wealth.

The problem with wealth is that some people may strictly use it to live luxuriously, pursue greater material gains, or appear socially superior to others. However, over time, these luxuries and material gains, along with a high social status, will likely not be good enough for that individual. Accordingly, the individual will want to live more luxuriously, chase even greater material gains, and continue to rise higher on the social hierarchy. Nonetheless, the individual will want even more after achieving all these things. The cycle will continue until he or she finally comes to the realization that he or she will never be happy; and as a result, that individual may turn to drugs, alcohol, and other addictive things that are all dead-end paths. There are countless examples of wealthy celebrities who have fit this description, with some committing suicide and others dying from accidental drug overdoses. God warns of this sort of thing. Scripture says that many people who go searching for wealth “have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10). The concept that achieving material gains and greater social status does not bring lasting happiness falls under the scope of the hedonic treadmill. In other words, once people have reached certain breakthroughs as a result of their wealth, happiness will likely return to where it started. As a result, it may not be worth our time trying to chase something that we think will make us happy. Perhaps, the lesson is that God wants us to be happy with what we have.

When we go chasing those things that we think will bring us greater happiness, the consequences are twofold. First, as I detailed in the previous paragraph, those things we thought would make us happy usually do not make us as happy as we had thought it would, particularly over an extended amount of time. Secondly, those things we chased so persistently takes up a great deal of our time and energy. Needless to say, this is time and energy we could be putting into things like our family, friends, and faith. This is not to mention that in our persistent endeavors, we often sacrifice our health. By sacrificing our health, we may not be able to enjoy those things we chased at all. Likewise, during our chase, we may end up losing family and friends to death. This means that when we have achieved those things we think will make us happy, we may not be able to share them with our loved ones. All these things imply that, in some cases, the pursuit of wealth and happiness have a negative correlation. Note that this is not a proof that there is a negative correlation between wealth and happiness but is a suggestion as to why, for certain people, there is a negative relationship between the two variables.

*The Takeaway:* God does not want us to go searching endlessly for wealth and other worldly things, particularly when it demands critical sacrifices. Rather, He wants us to be content with where we are and what we have, and He wants us to put our time and energy in the present moment.

***3. The Paradox of Hedonism***

In philosophy, hedonism is the ethical theory that “pleasure is the highest good and proper aim of human life” (“Hedonism”). Hedonism has been critiqued, with the main arguments against it being that it is bad for the environment around us and that it is bad for us, as individuals. In terms of arguing that it is bad for the environment, the line of thinking is that hedonism leads to over-consumption; and so, this means a quicker depletion of natural resources and our environment. The “environment” is also used to refer to our society, in general, since hedonism results in a decline of our work ethic which has a negative effect on broad society. In terms of hedonism being bad for us, on the individual level, one line of reasoning is that it can be deleterious for our health. (Veenhoven 438). Hedonists, in pursuing pleasures of the senses, may choose to overconsume potentially harmful substances such as sugar or alcohol, for example. Furthermore, hedonism does not work for the individual because, over time, he or she will desire something that brings even greater pleasure to the senses. In the long run, the hedonist will be unable to satisfy him or herself; and the result will be decreased happiness as time progresses (Veenhoven 438). As I have detailed, hedonism has negative implications on both the societal and individual level. However, I find it more counterintuitive that it can be so harmful to the individual; and so, describing the effects of hedonism at the individual level will be my focus in the paragraphs to come.

For many of us, food is one of the ways through which we find happiness. It is, in fact, one of the greatest gifts God has given us. Consuming it is one of the most pleasurable experiences for humans, yet seeking out this pleasure all the time will lead to little happiness. In other words, overindulging in food will fail to provide us with the happiness we sought. Similarly, calorie-rich foods, those with high amounts of fat and sugar that do not provide us with any sort of nutrients or vitamins, will not make us happy. Sure, we might gain some pleasure when eating the food; but shortly after, we will want more food and feel empty because the food did not provide us with any nourishment. Furthermore, we may feel some guilt about how the quantity and quality of food we ate will affect our bodies. Robert Lustig of *The Atlantic* argues that these tasty, calorie-rich foods may be a key source of our unhappiness, writing “Pleasure and happiness might just be the opposites. As we have spent the last 30 years pursuing sugar for pleasure, we have most decidedly become unhappy.” Despite our instinct to continually seek out pleasure through food, the key is to eat in a way that sustains us and allows us to glorify God in all that we do. This means consuming the right amount of nutritious food that gives us the most energy to live our best. In doing so, we will be able to enjoy God’s great gift of food without any sort of guilt and feel our best in all that we do.

On the contrary to not finding happiness when we go searching for it, we seem to be happiest when we go about our days being God’s servants. Viktor Frankl, writing on his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps in his *Man’s Search for Meaning*, says, “happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does as the unintended side effect of one’s personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself” (13). In other words, by going about our lives without seeking happiness but focusing on doing our duty, happiness will find us when we least expect it. As I have been reflecting on this idea, it brought me back to how when I was younger, I would eagerly anticipate “snow days.” Usually, when there was snow in the forecast, I would have a hard time sleeping at night because I did not want to miss hearing the phone call from the superintendent announcing that the students had off from school. If I had a test the following day, I would study very minimally because of the hope that there would be no school. Sometimes, I would put off my homework until the next morning. However, whenever getting the call from the superintendent, it never lived up to the hype because I had anticipated the call to the extent that I expected it. If no call came, then I was upset and never fully prepared to go to school. Over time, I learned not to go searching for a day off from school if snow was in the forecast, but to prepare for the next day and expect that there would be school. Then, if I did get the call in the middle of the night saying that school would be canceled, it would be a pleasant surprise. If I still had school, then at least I was prepared.

*The Takeaway:* We should not go looking for happiness through pleasure, as doing so may lead us down a dark path. Instead, we must fulfill our God-given duties and trust that happiness will come from doing so.

***4. The Paradox of Pain***

In explaining why God has a proclivity for paradox at the beginning of my thesis, one of the reasons I gave is that God uses paradox to bring balance to the world. One part of this balance entails the paradox of hedonism, as we are unable to find infinite happiness through pursuing pleasure. The other part of this balance is that pain helps us experience happiness. Intuitively, to find the most happiness, we should maximize pleasure and minimize pain. However, this is not the case. In fact, pain is sometimes necessary to experience happiness. Consider childbirth, for example. Childbirth, which is undoubtedly a very painful experience, brings about one of the greatest gifts that anyone could receive. Ultimately, the joy and awe that ensue from childbirth, not the pain, is what is remembered. I will give personal examples of the paradox of pain in the paragraphs to come; however, to put it briefly, my experience has taught me that pain is necessary because it serves as an effective contrast to pleasure. Without pain, the happiness that can be derived from pleasurable things is minimal and diminishes over time. In this insight lies the balance; in order for us to be happiest, we must find a healthy equilibrium between pleasure and pain.

As a runner, I can say that running ranks high up on the list of those things which bring me pain, at least in the physical sense. Nonetheless, I find myself running time and time again. Why would I purposely put myself through something that causes me pain? First off, I do so because I have an innate sense that it is my responsibility to do so. Because God gave me one body, it is my responsibility to maintain it and use it in order to glorify Him. Secondly, I do so because I am aware that the pain I will endure by running will bring me greater happiness over the long haul. In fact, by putting myself through pain when running, I am better able to enjoy any pleasurable experiences I partake in the rest of the day. For example, if I had run, I would feel justified in eating my favorite food or watching television; whereas, if I had not run, I would feel some sense of guilt because I would have felt as though I had not earned the right to engage in those pleasurable activities.

I have also found that pain is necessary for improvement. Once again, it is easy to understand this concept by using the example of exercise. If, when running, we never broke a sweat, or, when lifting weights, we never lifted anything heavier than a five-pound weight, then it would be difficult to get any faster or stronger. It does not mean that we must push ourselves to our absolute limit on a daily basis, nor does it mean we should ignore injuries in striving for improvement. Nonetheless, it does mean that we must feel some sort of pain in our journey to better ourselves. After all, if we felt no pain, our improvement would feel less significant because we would not feel as deserving. This is why so many athletes who use performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) have regrets later; even if they were not explicitly punished for taking PEDs, they do not feel the same sense of accomplishment compared to those athletes who accomplished great things authentically, through hard work and pain. Although our instincts often tell us that we can find shortcuts to greatness, the Truth is that pain is necessary if we want to achieve great things and feel good about what we have accomplished.

So far, I have discussed how physical pain can both help us to derive greater happiness from pleasure and to improve ourselves. However, as we all know, physical pain is not the only type of pain we endure; we also endure emotional pain, which many claim is more powerful than physical pain. In fact, more so than physical pain, emotional pain can have a dark side to it; this type of pain can damage our short-term and long-term health in ways that physical pain does not (Winch, “Why We Need to Take Emotional Pain as Seriously as Physical Pain”). Nonetheless, good can come from emotional pain, too. Emotional pain can allow the individual experiencing it to develop and grow. For example, when we lose a family member or close friend, we learn to better appreciate and love those who are still alive; and so, the emotional pain we experience from losing someone ultimately brings us closer to those who are still with us. On a lighter note, another example would be when a sports team loses a championship and feels the emotional pain of defeat, it gives that team greater motivation to improve and win a championship the following season. From these examples, it is evident that much like physical pain, emotional pain can be used to bring about greater development and growth for those who are impacted.

*The Takeaway:* Intuitively, it might seem that it is best to avoid pain at all costs. However, pain can often work to our benefit. God wants us to accept that pain will be a part of our lives and find the balance between pain and pleasure in the pursuit of happiness and bettering our lives.

***5. The Paradox of Prayer***

St. Francis de Sales said, “Every one of us needs half an hour of prayer every day, except when we are busy - then we need an hour” (qtd. in Aytona). One’s initial reaction to this remark may be that it makes no sense to spend more time praying when we are busy. After all, one might figure that if we are busy, then we will have less time to do things that are unrelated to that which is keeping us busy. During my time at DeSales, however, I have learned that there is truth to this statement from St. Francis de Sales. When I write essays, for instance, I have learned that leaving a greater amount of time for prayer, or any sort of reflective activity, is essential. Trying to write an essay without an adequate time for reflection leaves me confused and unsure of what I should write next. By praying, God gives me the energy and spirit I need. Similarly, when taking a test, I have found it is useful to pray, even if it is for only a couple of seconds when the professor is handing out the test. By taking these couple of seconds to pray, I am putting myself in God’s presence and centering myself; this, in turn, gives me the confidence I need to succeed and reminds me not to worry. I realize that everyone is different and that the methods I use may not work for everyone else. Whereas most of my praying consists of mental prayer, which entails praying with our minds and using few, if any, words, many people may find vocal prayer more useful, which is prayer that uses words either out loud or silently. There are other types of prayer, and the individual must decide what works best for him or her. The common thread, however, is that amid our busiest of times, we experience greater anxiety and stress; and so, during these times, prayer is essential because our help in these times comes from God. By praying more, our load will not be heavier; but, in fact, it will be much lighter.

In his “Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life,” Henri Nouwen relates, “The real spiritual guide is the one who, instead of advising us what to do or to whom to go, offers us a chance to stay alone and take the risk of entering into our own experience” (36). This insight from Nouwen reminds me of my experience when I ran track and field. My sophomore year, I was set on qualifying for the MAC championship in the 10k. I trained like I had never before. Nonetheless, each time I ran the 10k, I was coming up about two minutes short of the time I needed to qualify for the MAC championship. After one of the 10k races, I felt extremely sad and lonely. Three of my teammates who raced the 10k were celebrating because they qualified for the MAC championship, but I was one of two runners on the DeSales team who did not qualify. I was confused, wondering to myself how it was possible that I could not qualify, as many of my teammates had, after I had trained just as hard as they did. I asked several of my coaches and teammates if they thought there was something I could do, such as take a different approach to training, so that qualifying in the 10k would be possible for me in the future. Many of the people I talked to attempted to offer me solutions, but none of the advice I received was helpful. That night following the race, back at the hotel we stayed at, I felt lonely and reflected on how nobody seemed to understand my inner struggle. However, I spent a substantial amount of time in prayer that night, and I started to feel happier. Time with God allowed me to recognize that I had, indeed, put forth my best effort during the race and in the training up to the race; and therefore, the only thing I could do was accept the outcome. In that time alone with God, I listened carefully to a voice inside me that told me to continue building upon my progress and avoid giving up. When I fell asleep that night, I was no longer sad or fearful. Rather, I was at peace, knowing that I had put forth my best effort and that the following day was a new day that would offer me a new opportunity to improve. The lesson is that, by taking the time to be with God in prayer, the sadness and pain we feel can grow into solitude.

Many of us may say that we will have time for prayer when life slows down and we have nothing else going on. The problem with this mindset is that this is almost never the case; and even if life slows down for a little, it is probably not going to last for very long. The reality is that, in today’s world, life moves fast; and so, we almost always have several things that preoccupy our brains. As a result, it is fairly likely that whatever we want to accomplish must be accomplished when our life is sped up. However, what we can accomplish depends on God, as we are only able to go as far as God takes us. To put it another way, God works through us; and so, we cannot do what we are called to do when we do not seek out God.

*The Takeaway:* In busy times, prayer is essential for all of us. When we think that we can achieve all that we want to achieve without God and look to tackle life alone, He will surely show us that we are dependent beings and that our determination and hard work will be in vain.

***6. The Paradox of Worrying***

As I have been writing this thesis, COVID-19 has been impacting society in a big way. There has been a lot of worrying about the virus, and this worrying, regardless of the direct consequences that COVID-19 has on people, has brought tremendous suffering. With that in mind, the next paradox I would like to address is the paradox of worrying. This paradox goes hand in hand with the paradox of prayer because prayer helps us to worry less. The paradox of worrying stems from our instinct to worry because we think worrying will help us to avoid bad things from happening; but, in reality, most of what we worry about is out of our control. Consequently, worrying does not help anything, and it almost always makes things worse. The Bible says of worrying:

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (Matthew 6:25-27).

This is just one of many examples in the Bible where worry is condemned. The point is that we must not have anxiety about the things of this world, but we must trust in God to provide us with what we need, like the birds do. Although some worry about things that we have control over is good, it is useless and irrational to worry about those things that are out of our control. Consider that there are many uncontrollable things we worry about, but many of these things we worry about never happen. Although I cannot remember who it was, someone told me during my high school years that worrying is kind of like an interest payment on money. If what we worry about ends up happening, then our worrying becomes the interest on the payment we owe. Meanwhile, if what we worry about never happens, then our worrying becomes the interest on the payment we did not owe. The point is that, either way, the result is us paying interest that we wish we did not have to pay.

When I decided that I would discuss the paradox of worrying, one of the first examples that came to me was how worrying about sleep never helps me. In fact, I have found that it is more difficult to fall asleep when obsessing over trying to fall asleep. When I ran cross country and track, I always had a difficult time falling asleep the night before a race. Although it is possible I had a difficult time falling asleep because I could not get the next day’s race out of my mind, I think it is more likely that I could not fall asleep because I put the idea into my head that, if I did not get enough sleep, I would perform poorly. The result was many sleepless nights, despite my very best efforts to fall asleep. It might make sense on the surface that if we put a lot of effort into falling asleep, we will have more success in falling asleep. Are we not always told that the more effort we give, the more successful we will be? The problem with putting an unusually high amount of effort in falling asleep, however, is that we are showing a lack of trust in God. The Bible says, “He grants sleep to those He loves” (Psalm 127:2). I have discovered that by not worrying about falling asleep and trusting in God to provide me with the sleep I need, falling asleep is much easier for me. As counterintuitive as it seems, I will even sometimes try to stay awake in order to more easily fall asleep. This is known as paradoxical intention, and research has shown that it works because when the individual who is having difficulty falling asleep engages in what is causing them panic, i.e., staying awake, then the anxiety stemming from trying to fall asleep gradually declines (Sharma and Chittaranjan 361). Ultimately, the lesson is that God wants us not to worry about sleep because He will provide it when we need it. This means that we must let the process of sleep arise naturally, without worrying that we will not receive enough of it.

There is, in fact, statistical data supporting the claim that worrying over the uncertainties of life does us no good. In one study conducted by researchers at Cornell University, the subjects were asked to write down all the things they worried about over an extended period. At the conclusion of the study, it was found that 85% of what the participants worried about never happened. In addition, as for the 15% of things that did happen, 79% of the participants responded that they could either handle what had worried them better than what they had thought, or they had learned something significant from it (Goewey). The takeaway from the study is that it is not worth our time and energy worrying because most of our worries never materialize; for the ones that do, there is either something positive to take away, or that thing we had worried about is not as bad as we had initially imagined. Needless to say, there are those few instances when our worries materialize and turn out just as bad, if not worse, than what we had expected. However, even then, worrying does not do any good. In all likelihood, worrying only makes things worse, particularly if one puts his or her health at risk as a result of the worrying.Ultimately, this means worrying can cause us to suffer twice.

*The Takeaway:* Although it is our instinct to worry if we have feelings of uncertainty, it is best not to worry, provided it is something that we have zero or very limited control over. Instead of being in a constant state of distress, God wants us to turn our worries over to Him. Although God makes no guarantee that everything will be perfect and turn out exactly as we had desired, He will provide us what we need and offer us hope for a better future.

***7. The Paradox of Multitasking***

Multitasking is something all of us have tried to do at some time or another. For many of us, it is a part of our everyday lives. We figure that multitasking seems both effective and efficient, so we do it; moreover, it gives us feelings of productivity and control. The result is that much of our society has come to value multitasking, and the widespread opinion is that it is a good thing. There are some job candidates who might even put it on their resume. However, studies have brought into question just how effective and efficient multitasking is. To understand why multitasking is not effective, consider that when people think they are multitasking, they are probably not doing two things at once but are doing two different things in quick succession (Kubu and Machado). This means that it is not going to be any better than doing one thing at a time. Making things worse is that multitasking impairs our ability to do our best thinking. We must divide our attention on the different tasks we are trying to juggle; and so, it is more difficult to think clearly (Kubu and Machado). Furthermore, multitasking makes us less productive because it means that we must keep switching tasks. In fact, according to University of Michigan professor of psychology David Meyer, our productivity can decline by 40% when we have to keep switching from one task to another (“Multitasking: Switching Costs”). In addition to multitasking leading to diminished effectiveness and efficiency, multitasking can mean increased stress levels and even negative long-term implications on the brain, including long-term memory loss and reductions in the grey matter of our brains that are responsible for cognitive control and emotion (Winch, “10 Real Risks of Multitasking, to Mind and Body”).

The paradox of multitasking makes sense when looking at Christian teachings. Like other paradoxes, God uses this paradox so that balance is maintained in our world. If we could do everything at once, how would that impact our relationship with God, for example? Moreover, when God created the world, it was not His intention to overwhelm us. Scripture reads, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:34). This Bible verse illustrates that we do not need to worry about getting everything done at once. Rather, God will provide us with the time we need if we trust in Him. It is when we try to do too much as a result of our lack of trust in Him that disaster strikes, and unnecessary tragedies happen. For example, think about how texting and driving so often results in car accidents and deaths that were preventable. In the case of texting and driving, we think texting will save us time; but really, the amount of time we save by texting while driving is minimal and there is never a time a text is so important that it should put lives in jeopardy.

Additionally, multitasking can separate us from God. For example, consider how our relationship with Christ would be affected if we only pray to Him when we are doing something else. If this is the case, then it is doubtful that the individual will fully connect with Christ in the way that He desires. Even when we go to Church, we may not be paying full attention to the service because our worries and concerns are taking hold of our thoughts. I know I am guilty of this, having sometimes not listened to a single word of the sermon because I was preoccupied with other thoughts. However, following the sermon, I usually feel as though I had missed out on something; to put it another way, I feel that if I had given my undivided attention to the sermon, Christ would have been able to enter into my heart and take away those things that had troubled me.

*The Takeaway:* Multitasking is both inefficient and ineffective. Accordingly, if we want to fully experience Christ, we must offer Him our undivided attention. If we try to multitask God and the things of this world, our relationship with Him will fall short.

***8. The Paradox of Choice***

One of my favorite paradoxes is the paradox of choice. This paradox states that despite our intuition that more choices will bring us greater satisfaction, the more options we have, the less satisfied we are with our options and the less likely we are to commit to one of those options (Schwartz 3). According to a 2000 study, shoppers were exposed to two display tables with jam; the one display table had 24 varieties of jam and the other had six varieties. Although the display table with 24 varieties drew more interest, the shoppers were 10 times as likely to make a purchase from the display table with six varieties (Craig). As for me, I am often overwhelmed when I enter a supermarket due to the incredible number of choices I have. Although it is tempting to think all the choices will make life easier, it makes it more difficult because it becomes harder to know what to get. Ultimately, I never feel satisfied with my purchases because I feel as though I could have made a better purchase than the one I made. As a result, I usually feel some regret as I leave, and it is often that I second guess my decision-making. This is not to mention the extra time and energy it takes to make the purchase. Research backs my experience when it comes to being given a multitude of choices and making a purchase. Schwartz says in his book *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* that excessive choice can lead to decision-making paralysis, anxiety, and perpetual stress (3). Those people who are determined to make the most optimal of choices, who Schwartz calls “maximizers,” (4) are especially susceptible to these problems that ensue from excessive choice. In a study that Schwartz conducted, he found the following:

“People with high maximization scores experienced less satisfaction with life, were less happy, were less optimistic, and were more depressed than people with low maximization scores. In fact, people with extreme maximization scores—scores of 65 or more out of 91—had depression scores that placed them in the borderline clinical depression range” (85-86).

Although it is important to note that the study did not show a cause and effect relationship between being a maximizer and unhappiness, it should, at least, bring into question the effects of too much choice on people who are constantly looking for the best choice.

Despite the cautionary tale I have told against choice, it is apparent that our society puts a heavy emphasis on choice. The standard way of thinking is that “added options can only make us better off as a society” (Schwartz 19). It is also apparent that our society is more noncommittal than it has been in the past. For instance, data has demonstrated that U.S. church membership and belief in God are at an all-time low (Hrynowski). I believe there is a connection between our desire for greater choice and noncommittal attitudes. As the paradox of choice says, we are less likely to commit to an option when given more options. This can explain why our society that is driven by choices is less likely to commit to a God or a Church. Rather than committing to a choice, we are committing to being noncommittal. This has left so much of humanity idolizing one thing one day, only to move on idolizing another thing the next day. Ironically, although we think we are freeing ourselves from a commitment, the reality is that we are becoming slaves to being noncommittal. This, of course, is a paradox in itself.

In summary, rather than always wanting more choices, it would be wise if we accept the choices we have. We will be happier, less overwhelmed, and more likely to end up making a choice, which is what God wants from us. In making that choice, God wants us to trust Him and know that the choices He has given us are enough. Introducing more choices many times does not make things better, and it can even lead us astray from God. Christ tells us, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

*The Takeaway:* If we are to enter through the narrow gate, as Jesus calls us to do, we cannot embrace all the choices that the world offers us. We must instead commit to those things that God has called us to do, which requires rejecting many of the choices our society throws at us.

***9. The Paradox of Giving***

Every Christmas, it seems that I am not quite satisfied with the presents I receive. It is not that the problem is I received presents I did not want; in fact, I usually end up getting what I had asked for. However, it usually turns out that the presents I wanted do not bring me the level of satisfaction that I had thought they would bring me. In saying this, I am not suggesting that it is not fun to receive presents; nevertheless, I have learned that the feeling I get when receiving presents is not nearly as rewarding as the feeling when giving presents, particularly when I am giving to someone I love. This discovery offers insight into another paradox: that by giving, we are actually receiving. Thinking about this idea from a mathematical perspective makes no sense. For example, if I have three cookies and give one cookie to my friend, then I am left with two cookies. By giving away a cookie, I am left with fewer cookies than which I began; and so, receiving is impossible, the mathematician would say. However, even as someone who has a strong love and respect for mathematics, I realize that not everything can be looked at through a mathematical lens. In the following paragraph, I will discuss how we can better make sense of the concept of receiving by giving.

I think the best way to understand receiving by giving is to look at “giving” as a synonym for “loving.” Because love is the very essence of what God is and is at the center of Christian teaching, it makes sense that we receive when we give. When we give, we allow God to enter into our hearts; and so, we gain so much more than what we started with. Furthermore, it is by giving that we are building our relationship with the recipient of the gift; and so, we are also becoming richer from the shared bond we hold with the gift’s recipient. The result is that we have received by giving. If this explanation of why we receive when we give is not appealing, then consider that there have also been studies done illustrating the tangible effects that giving has. Notre Dame scholars Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson, who wrote “Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose,” have the following to say about generosity:

The reality of generosity is instead actually *paradoxical*. Generosity does not usually work in

simple, zero-sum, win-lose ways. The results of generosity are often instead unexpected,

counterintuitive, win-win. Rather than generosity producing net losses, in general the more

generously people give of themselves, the more of many goods they receive in turn. Sometimes

they receive more of the same kind of the thing that they gave - money, time, attention, and so

forth. But, more often and importantly, generous people tend to receive back goods that are even

more valuable than those they gave: happiness, health, a sense of purpose in life, and personal

growth (10).

In other words, even if we experience a net loss initially when we give, we end up experiencing a net gain in the long run, even if we accrue the net gain in an unexpected, roundabout way. Patricia Boyle, PhD, a Rush Alzheimer’s Disease Center neuropsychologist, is another who has found that giving helps our health, owing to the fact that contributing to the better of society gives us greater meaning. These health benefits include lower blood sugar levels, better cholesterol levels, lower amounts of belly fat, and lower blood pressure, all of which put the individual at a lower risk for heart disease and stroke (“The Health Benefits of Giving”).

Up to this point, I have offered explanations for why we are able to receive through giving. However, we are also able to give through receiving. When we receive, we are actually giving because our feelings of gratitude and happiness enter the heart of the person who is doing the giving. By this logic, we can see that giving and receiving are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are more of the same than they are different. Yet, in my experience, it seems that much of our society wrongly deems giving and receiving to be two separate acts; we see giving as an act that depletes our resources, while we see receiving as an act that helps us accumulate resources. This type of thought has created a society with people that are too eager to receive and too reluctant to give.

*The Takeaway:* When we see giving as receiving, and vice versa, we will better appreciate God’s call to give; and so, we will see the world through a clearer lens. We can best understand the relationship between giving and receiving through the words of Jesus: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38).

**Research on Paradox**

In the future, it is important that a substantial amount of research is done on paradox. The research should focus on comparing life outcomes when people act on different paradoxes versus when they do not act on them, understanding how different segments of the public perceive paradox, gathering more information on the paradoxes known to us, and discovering other paradoxes that we are not aware of at this time. With respect to gathering research about life outcomes when people act on certain paradoxes versus when they do not act on them, one way this can be done is by conducting surveys on our elders which ask questions about paradox. These questions could either directly or indirectly ask about paradox. It would be most useful if the questions were open-ended so that the recipients of the surveys would be able to explain why they feel the way that they do. Ultimately, the aim would be to see if the responses fell more in line with what the paradoxes or our intuitions tell us is the correct or most effective approach to life.

The next component of the research would be gathering public perception of paradox. This research would include polling members of different age groups and asking them the degree to which they believe certain paradoxes to be true. From the polls, information such as how open people are to paradox and how different age groups view paradox would be obtained. If the research clearly shows that people are more inclined to embrace paradox with more life experience, then it may be worth teaching younger generations about paradox, even in a classroom setting. In doing so, even if members of younger generations do not fully embrace or understand paradox at the time, they will be more open to it as their lives progress. Then, they will be more likely to look for examples of paradox in their lives; and as a result, there will be a greater probability that they would accept paradox at a younger age. In my estimation, if more people accepted, or at least understood, paradox at a younger age, then these people would be wiser and less prone to making severe mistakes that could harm them or lead them down a dark path.

It is also necessary to conduct research that seeks to gain a greater understanding of paradox. In doing so, it is important to further investigate the paradoxes that have already been written about or recorded. This research should focus on gathering statistical data that seeks to either confirm or refute each of these paradoxes and gaining an understanding of how they may have a connection to Scripture. Furthermore, research should be done that seeks to unearth paradoxes that are unknown to us at this time. Because the nature of the world is paradoxical, I believe that we have only scratched the surface in understanding paradox. By gaining a greater understanding of the paradoxes already known to us and making new paradoxical insights, we will be able to better comprehend our world. This will ultimately allow us to better know God and make it easier to develop a closer, more meaningful relationship with Him.

**Final Thoughts**

Having taken the time to read my thesis, I hope you have gained many new insights and have opened yourself up to new ways of thinking about the world. By no means is what I have written gospel. Nonetheless, if you are convinced by most of what I have written, and you feel as though you have an understanding of how God uses paradox, I feel as though I did my job. At only 22 years old, I am still growing and have a lot to learn; reading this thesis 20 years from now would be interesting to see how I would revise what I have written and to get me to ponder which other paradoxes I would write about. As I have mentioned, the nine paradoxes I have discussed is not a comprehensive list of the paradoxes that exist; but rather, I chose to discuss those that I have experienced on some level and that I believe are the most profound.

If I was unsuccessful in convincing you, the reader, of the role paradox plays in our lives and its relationship to Christianity, then I hope that you would at least consider what I have written as you go about your life in the coming days. If I was successful in convincing you of the truth of the paradoxes I have written about and their connection to Christianity, then know it is not enough to just have knowledge of what I have written. Rather, I urge that you act on the paradoxes I have discussed and be on the lookout for other paradoxes I have not discussed. When acting on these paradoxes, you may find that this can be difficult. As I have worked to integrate them into my own life, I can assure you that there will be times when you do not feel like acting on these paradoxes and other times when your vision of the paradoxes will be blurred. And that is okay. Because these paradoxes go against what our intuitions and instincts tell us to do, it takes time to fully integrate them into our lives. It is crucial that we are patient with ourselves and understand that we will encounter setbacks. Although acting on paradox is easier said than done, life makes a lot more sense when doing so; by acting on paradox, we will be able to grow in our relationship with Christ and be fully open to Him, His mysteries, and His wonderful creation.

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