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MATTHEW 23:3 EXPLAINED

This verse is sometimes misunderstood and it is then consequently misapplied. Let's examine it carefully. Let's start off with the context.

In Matthew 23:2 Christ had said:

Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: (Matthew 23:2)

Now comes Matthew 23:3:

ALL THEREFORE WHATSOEVER THEY BID YOU OBSERVE, [that] observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. (Matthew 23:3)

Let's look at the Greek text of this verse.

panta oun hosa an eiposin humin terein tereite kai poieite kata de ta erga auton me poieite legousin gar kai ou poioucin (Matthew 23:3) (Received Text)

Before we can CORRECTLY translate this verse, we need some background in Greek. Biblical Greek employs the use of some particles for which we don't really have an accurate translation in English. Of concern in this context is the primary particle "an", the fourth word in this verse. I have explained this elsewhere, but it is very relevant at this point.

We don't really have an accurate equivalent in English for this word "an". In Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament it is described as follows:

"a particle INDICATING THAT SOMETHING CAN OR SHOULD OCCUR ON CERTAIN CONDITIONS, OR BY THE COMBINATION OF CERTAIN FORTUITOUS CAUSES. In Latin it has no equivalent, nor do the English words "HAPLY, PERCHANCE" exactly and everywhere correspond to it."

It is never used when something is definite and unconditional. It is a word that conveys that SOMETHING IS CONDITIONAL.

In the New Testament this particle is used 191 times in 173 different verses. In the KJV text it is only translated 80 times ... 111 times the translators left it out in English because it is quite verbose and difficult to accurately convey its meaning.

Yet it obviously DID convey some meaning in the original Greek text. That's why it is used! So when something is left untranslated, there is always the possibility that some meaning is not conveyed correctly.

Let's now look at the first three words in this verse : ... "panta oun hosa".

"PANTA" is the neuter plural of the adjective "pas". Here it is used both, without the article and without a substantive. Under these conditions Thayer's Lexicon gives the meaning of this neuter plural "panta" as "ALL THINGS" and defines it as follows:

"of a certain definite totality or sum of things, THE CONTEXT SHOWING WHAT THINGS ARE MEANT."

Notice that this is not the same as the English carte blanche phrase "ALL things"! The context always makes clear that a certain definite group of things is meant.

"OUN" is a conjunction meaning "THEREFORE". Thayer's Lexicon defines it as follows:

"a conjunction indicating that something follows from another necessarily. Hence it is used in drawing a conclusion and in connecting sentences together logically."

So this word connects the statement being presented logically to the previous statement.

"HOSA" is the neuter plural of the relative adjective "hosos", which is used of abundance and multitude.

The words "panta hosa" are used together fairly often to mean: "all things whatsoever". However, keep in mind that the word "panta" does imply certain limitations to the word "all".

Now understand this! This is extremely important and usually overlooked!

IN THE ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS WE DON'T SEE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE GREEK ORIGINAL "PANTA HOSA" AND THE PHRASE "PANTA HOSA AN"! BUT THE PARTICLE "AN" MAKES THE SECOND STATEMENT CONDITIONAL!

Remember that the translators left "an" untranslated 111 times. All those 111 statements are somewhat conditional, but this is totally obscured by these omissions. And at times people argue quite dogmatically about such verses.

To get a feel for this difference, let's examine the places where "panta hosa" is used and then the places where "panta hosa an" is used. (The Greek "an" is obviously also used in many other contexts apart from with "panta hosa".)

"PANTA HOSA":

This appears in 12 verses in the N.T.. I have rendered the English translation in capital letters for easy recognition. Notice:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth ALL THAT he hath, and buyeth that field. (Matthew 13:44)

Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold ALL THAT he had, and bought

it. (Matthew 13:46)

But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and ALL THAT he had, and payment to be made. (Matthew 18:25)

Teaching them to observe ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, [even] unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matthew 28:20)

For all [they] did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in ALL THAT she had, [even] all her living. (Mark 12:44)

I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of ALL THAT I possess. (Luke 18:12)

Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell ALL THAT thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me. (Luke 18:22)

Come, see a man, which told me ALL THINGS THAT ever I did: is not this the Christ? (John 4:29)

And many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him for the saying of the woman, which testified, He told me ALL THAT ever I did. (John 4:39)

And many resorted unto him, and said, John did no miracle: but ALL THINGS THAT John spake of this man were true. (John 10:41)

ALL THINGS THAT the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew [it] unto you. (John 16:15)

Now they have known that ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER thou hast given me are of thee. (John 17:7)

In all of these statements the word "panta" implies that THE CONTEXT SHOWS EXACTLY WHAT THINGS ARE MEANT ... but the statements themselves are unconditional. Now let's move on.

"PANTA HOSA AN":

This expression appears in only 5 verses of the N.T.. Again I have rendered the English translation in capital letters.

Therefore ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

And ALL THINGS, WHATSOEVER ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive. (Matthew 21:22)

ALL therefore WHATSOEVER they bid you observe, [that] observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. (Matthew 23:3)

Therefore I say unto you, WHAT THINGS SOEVER ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive [them], and ye shall have [them]. (Mark 11:24)

For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER he shall say unto you. (Acts 3:22)

Do you see what the translators have done? They have rendered the conditional particle "an" as "WHATSOEVER" in English.

BUT THAT IS WRONG!

"Whatsoever" actually implies "NO CONDITIONS AT ALL"! But that is not what the Greek "an" means! And all Greek scholars know this quite well.

Look again at the definition of this particle, as quoted above from Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon.

"a particle INDICATING THAT SOMETHING CAN OR SHOULD OCCUR ON CERTAIN CONDITIONS, OR BY THE COMBINATION OF CERTAIN FORTUITOUS CAUSES.

So notice the blurring of distinctions that the translators have created: The words "ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER" represent the unconditional statement "panta hosa" in Matthew 28:20 and in John 17:7; but they also represent the CONDITIONAL statement "panta hosa an" in Matthew 7:12; Matthew 21:22 and in Acts 3:22.

THIS DISTINCTION IS TOTALLY LOST IN THE ENGLISH TEXT!

"Whatsoever" is an appropriate translation for the phrase "panta hosa" because "whatsoever" in English does not imply any conditions. But "whatsoever" is NOT a correct translation for the phrase "panta hosa an".

So if we look at the above 5 verses where "panta hosa an" is used, the word "whatsoever" needs to be replaced by a word or a term that conveys that CONDITIONS ARE IMPLIED.

So let's look at these 5 verses again, but taking the Greek participle "an" into account.

Therefore all things, IN CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES, UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS, ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

And all things, ON CERTAIN CONDITIONS OR CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES, ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive. (Matthew 21:22)

All therefore ON CERTAIN CONDITIONS OR UNDER SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES they bid you observe, [that] observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. (Matthew 23:3)

Therefore I say unto you, What things IN CERTAIN REGARDS OR AREAS OF LIFE ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive [them], and ye shall have [them]. (Mark 11:24)

For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things IN THE SPECIFIC AREAS THAT WERE PROPHESED WHICH he shall say unto you. (Acts 3:22)

With this last verse we might ask why a statement referring to Jesus Christ would contain a conditional element. The reason is found in the passage Peter was here quoting, Deuteronomy chapter 18. Peter was quoting verse 15.

The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; (Deuteronomy 18:15)

And the next verse introduces the conditional element.

ACCORDING TO ALL THAT THOU DESIREDST OF THE LORD THY GOD IN HOREB in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. (Deuteronomy 18:16)

In verse 18 the prophecy is repeated.

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. (Deuteronomy 18:18)

And this verse also contains the obvious conditions which we are familiar with ... that God would "put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him."

So Peter in Acts 3:22 added a conditional element to his statement because he knew that the Hebrew passage he was quoting was presented in a context with certain specific limitations implied. Peter was not trying to say that we should only listen to Christ on certain conditions. It is more a reflection of the original Hebrew thinking.

Anyway, back to our 5 verses with a conditional statement. As can be seen, an attempt to convey the CORRECT meaning of this phrase "panta hosa an" actually makes these verses quite clumsy and difficult to construct. That is precisely WHY the translators left this word "an" untranslated in 111 cases! It is difficult to accurately convey this conditional element into English and there is no way around that.

But we should never overlook the meaning that this particle "an" gives to any phrase it is attached to.

I realize that for many people these finer details of translation can be quite confusing. But they are important when we are dealing with things that talk about "ALL THINGS"; and they really DO make a difference. Perhaps you can recall the many heated discussions you may have heard over the years at College and in Speech Clubs about Scriptures that talk about "ALL THINGS", where speakers have become extremely dogmatic in their interpretation that "ALL THINGS means ALL THINGS!". Hopefully you now understand two things:

A) that the word "panta" requires us to EXAMINE THE CONTEXT to see exactly what is meant;

B) that often there may be the little untranslated Greek particle "an", which IMPLIES CERTAIN ADDITIONAL UNDERSTOOD CONDITIONS.

With this background we are now ready to look at Matthew 23:3 again.

In the previous verse Christ had made the point that the scribes and Pharisees were in a certain position of authority. Because of this premise, Christ said in the next verse:

"THEREFORE all things (Greek 'panta hosa', limited to what is being talked about in the context!) which, in certain specific circumstances and under certain conditions (Greek 'an'), they bid you observe, observe and do; BUT DO NOT YOU AFTER THEIR WORKS (again bringing a limitation into the statement!); for they say and do not."

Now we are ready to examine the second half of this verse. Let's first look at the phrase "BUT DO NOT YOU AFTER THEIR WORKS" ("kata de ta erga auton me poieite"). The word "not" here is translated from the Greek word "me", which expresses a "qualified negation". This is not as strong and definite as the "absolute denial", which is expressed by the Greek word "ou" (or "ouk"). This absolute denial is used in the last phrase of this verse.

The clause "FOR THEY SAY AND DO NOT" ("legousin gar kai ou poiousin") is introduced by the conjunction "gar". Notice how Thayer's Lexicon defines the word "gar":

"... it comes to pass that, by the use of this particle (i.e. gar), either the reason and cause of a foregoing statement is added, whence arises the causal or argumentative force of the particle, 'for'; or some previous declaration is explained ..."

This last part of this verse gives "THE REASON AND CAUSE" for what Christ said in the first part. Note also that here Christ used the absolute negative "ou".

Now we should be able to put the whole picture together:

Question: exactly what did Christ mean when He said: "ALL THINGS which they bid you observe"?

Answer: Christ was specifically referring to those things which the Pharisees told others to do but which they themselves ABSOLUTELY refused to do! From verse 4 onwards down to verse 33 Christ spells these things out in detail!

In Matthew 23:3 Jesus Christ did NOT endorse some unqualified total submission to the religious authority of the Pharisees! The rest of the chapter makes that abundantly clear. So does the grammatical construction of this verse, as I have shown.

Right after this statement Jesus Christ proceeded SEVEN TIMES to call the scribes and Pharisees "hypocrites" (verses 13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27 and 29). "Hypocrites" are actors and pretenders. It is in these areas where the Pharisees pretended to practice what they themselves preached, that Christ instructed people to actually obey and "do" those things.

Christ's statement has absolutely NOTHING to do with having to believe the TEACHINGS (i.e. the doctrines) of the Pharisees. As far as "THE TEACHINGS" of the Pharisees were concerned, Jesus Christ had actually warned His followers to be ON GUARD AGAINST THEM! Matthew recorded this a few chapters earlier.

Then understood they HOW THAT HE BADE [THEM] not BEWARE of the leaven of bread, but OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE PHARISEES and of the Sadducees. (Matthew 16:12)

Many of the teachings of the Pharisees were clearly wrong! And Christ certainly did not want His disciples to follow those teachings! But in Matthew 23 Christ was focusing on THE HYPOCRITICAL

DOUBLE STANDARD OF THE PHARISEES! The things they OFFICIALLY urged people to do (obey God's laws meticulously, pray, study, fast, give alms, etc.) were right and people really SHOULD do those things ... EVEN THOUGH the hypocritical Pharisees didn't actually do these things themselves.

THAT IS THE MESSAGE OF MATTHEW 23:3.

To make this very plain: Matthew 23:3 is NOT some kind of instruction about being submissive to church government. That just isn't what this is talking about! And at no stage thereafter do we see Peter, James and John and Paul exhibiting any kind of submission to the religious rule of the Pharisees. The 30 verses that follow Matthew 23:3 show exactly what Christ meant. For 30 verses Christ elaborated on His statement. At no stage in the entire discussion is Christ talking about "church government"!

Furthermore, the conditional nature of Christ's statement (expressed by the Greek particle 'an') implies that people were to judiciously evaluate each instruction against the Word of God. Christ clearly did not urge people to "observe and do" instructions that were contrary to God's Word. This conditional nature is not at all conveyed in the English translation of this verse.

I have also covered this question to some degree in my other article entitled "THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES".

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