

324 *Devil's advocate*

After I had played devil's advocate over the sheep and goats,^[323] my friend responded: 'There's no contradiction of faith/works, if properly understood', and I agree with him...

In Mt 25³¹⁻⁴⁶ the plain meaning is that God decides our fate – sheep/goats, right/left, heaven/hell – on the basis of what we have *done* in our lives: have we cared for the sick, the poor, strangers, prisoners? It couldn't be clearer: we are saved by works, plain and simple. And these are Jesus' own words.

But this is only an *apparent* contradiction; we are saved not by works but by faith in Jesus. So how do we square this with other parts of Scripture? Well, we start with the context.

(1) Who was Jesus talking to? *Self-righteous religious people*? (2) What was the cultural context? *Maybe people saw God as an angry judge who would condemn you soon as look at you*? Then (3) what was Jesus trying to get across to them? *Perhaps he just wanted to challenge their preconceived ideas*? And Jesus certainly used hyperbole elsewhere in his teaching – extravagant over-statement.

So, yes, the *plain meaning* of this passage is salvation by works, but because of our knowledge of Scripture overall, we affirm that, although Jesus *said* that, it can't have been what he actually meant. Is that OK? [cue: devil's advocate]

'No! You don't *like* what Jesus *clearly* said, so you're *changing* it. You're rejecting the plain meaning of Scripture!'

Well, to be fair, we can tend to 'fiddle with Scripture'. We take those scriptures we like and quote them, often, and we ignore those scriptures we don't like, or we 'reinterpret' them.

Two principles I'd like to draw here: (1) We do sometimes *have* to take verses that seem to say one thing, and *interpret* them in the wider scriptural context. (2) We have to be very careful not to take words aimed at *one audience* and apply them to a *different audience*. (My oft-repeated example: Paul berates **Christians**: 'You stupid people, you *know* that God loves you and that Jesus has saved you, so why do you go on sinning?! The wages of sin is death.' And yet we use that to berate **unbelievers**: 'Believe in Jesus or you'll die!')

One other recurrent theme for me is how the blazes have we tortured and killed fellow believers in the name of Jesus?! Being charitable, they were trying to counter dangerous wrong teaching, but more realistically they feared their leadership being undermined – but all based on different *interpretations*.

Thankfully, we seem to have navigated allowing women to be accepted as leaders of churches, without killing one another (though some very hurtful comments have been made). Yet some people do *still* believe that we have allowed 'the world' to force us into its mould and have rejected God's intended best: male leadership.

My plea is that we accept that there *are* different interpretations of Scripture, so great care is needed, especially where insisting on 'the plain meaning' risks splitting our churches.