

344 The Jesus hermeneutic

I guess most *mis*interpretation is well-meaning, but the first case was deliberate. In Gen 3, the snake said, **Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?**

So the woman checked her Bible and quoted: **You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will surely die.** ^{Gen 2:17}

You will not surely die! the snake retorted. And in a sense he was right: while God did say, ‘You will surely die,’ God didn’t mean *literally*, ‘you will drop down dead’.

A bit far-fetched, but my point is that interpretation involves going from what the Bible *says* to what it actually *means*. God inspired those who wrote it, but for what *purpose* – for the people at the time and for later generations? Missing the *purpose* of a Scripture – for then or for now – can cause real problems, so we need Jesus’ help. We need Jesus’ way of interpreting Scripture – his hermeneutic. So what does Jesus say?...

Don’t suppose that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn’t come to destroy them; I came to fulfil them! I’m telling you the truth: until heaven and earth disappear, not one stroke, not one dot is going to disappear from the law until it has all come true. So anyone who relaxes a single one of these commandments, even the little ones, and teaches that to the people, will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven. But anyone who does them and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of heaven. **Yes, let me tell you: unless your covenant behaviour is far superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the Kingdom of heaven.** ^{Mt 5:17-19 (NTFE)}

Sounds pretty clear, doesn’t it? The Old Testament laws remain, and if I break even *one* of them, I’m in trouble; and **unless my behaviour is 100% righteous, I won’t get to heaven.** As with Jesus’ sheep and goats teaching, ^{Mt 25:31-46} this is salvation by what we do – by works. **Jesus! This isn’t helping me!** Also, it’s talking about ‘going to heaven’, which I’ve been saying is *not* the good news that was preached by the early church.

OK, but set against this the fact that Jesus *deliberately* broke some of those laws: **He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread— which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.** ^{Mt 12:3-8}

And even one of the Ten Commandments: **At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.** ^{Mt 12:1} But he did also say to them, **The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.** ^{Mk 2:27,8}

To me, this is Jesus showing us how to read our Bibles – look for the *purpose* – the purpose for the *first hearers* (e.g. don’t eat shellfish ^{Dt 14:9,10} – it can poison you!) and its purpose for *now*. But for the latter, I can’t tell you how to interpret – that’s between you and God. However, if we differ in our application, I have to take care not to judge you.