

INTRODUCTION

You've probably heard of the wonderful serenity prayer written by Reinhold Niebuhr. It says, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."

Someone sent me an email containing a funny prayer called "The Senility Prayer." It's for people like me who are getting older. It says, "God grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway; the good fortune to run into the ones I do; and the eyesight to tell the difference."

In Matthew 23 Jesus addressed the hypocrisy of a group of people who didn't like him very much—the Jewish religious leaders. But Jesus didn't avoid them; He met them head on. Sometime when you're ordering in a restaurant you might say, "I'll take the hamburger, but hold the onions." These Pharisees said, "I'll take the camel, but hold the gnat."

In this single chapter Jesus repeats a phrase seven times: "Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" These words are so strong, some have called it a Jesus-rant. But it wasn't so much WHO ticked Jesus off as WHAT: religious hypocrisy. But when you read Matthew 23 it's easy to see how these religious leaders were so angry they arrested Him and demanded He be crucified. In fact, in a few days after Jesus spoke these words, this same group is going to hand Him over to Pilate to be crucified.

I encourage you to read the entire chapter, but since we are focusing on the parables and miracles of Jesus I want us to look at one of the most colorful word pictures Jesus ever used.

Matthew 23:23-24. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."

For the Pharisees, righteousness was a competition. They bragged about tithing their spices, so they would appear holy. In the last message Jesus pointed out they made their phylacteries larger and their prayer shawls longer so that could say, "I'm better than you."

In the 1960s there was a popular TV commercial for a dog food called Ken-L Ration that pictured kids holding their puppies singing, "My dog's bigger than your dog. My dog's faster than yours. My dog's stronger 'cause he gets Ken-L Ration. My dog's better than yours." That was the attitude of the hypocrites. They bragged about their righteousness. "My faith's stronger than your faith. My faith's better than yours. My faith's bigger 'cause I tithe my spices, my faith's better than yours!"

But the Christian life is not a competition. It's like the two good old boys who were out in the woods hunting for squirrels. They came upon a bear and shot their squirrel guns at it, which only made him mad. The bear charged them, and they dropped their guns and started running as fast as they could. One of the guys started kicking off his boots so he could run faster. His friend saw

that and said, "Man, why are you doing that? You know we can't outrun that bear." His friends said, "I don't have to outrun that bear, I just have to outrun YOU!" The Christian life is a race, but we're not trying to outrun each other, we should be encouraging one another.

Let's unpack this parable of Jesus and see how it applies to our lives.

THE PARABLE: An example of Jewish humor...and more

The idea of straining out gnats may seem strange to us, but that's exactly what the Pharisees did. The Pharisees were terrified that they might get a gnat in their drink so they put muslin linen cloth strainers over their cups, and the water or wine would be poured through it to filter out any bugs. It was a complicated process. They had to keep putting the strainer on when they poured the wine, and take the strainer off to drink. Put the strainer back on for a refill.

Dr. Elton Trueblood, a respected New Testament scholar wrote a book entitled, *The Humor of Jesus*. Dr. Trueblood points out Jesus often used Jewish humor to get His point across. This is a perfect example of it. It doesn't sound humorous to us, because we aren't Jews living in the first century. Humor doesn't translate into other cultures. Just try telling a knock-knock joke in China, and wait for them to say, "Who's there?" You'll be waiting a long time.

Jesus was partial to camel jokes. He said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. When Jesus said, "You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel," I'm certain people began to laugh.

Jewish humor was based upon hyperbole and imagery. Just the idea of a person trying to swallow a camel is a funny picture. Jesus employed many of these comical images. I had friend tell me once that each night he read the Bible to his five-year old son. He was reading in Matthew 7 about the guy with the plank in his eye trying to help the guy with a speck in his eye. As he read that his son started giggling. He said, "What's so funny?" The little boy said, "Dad, that's funny! A plank won't fit into your eye, it's too big!"

In addition to a funny picture, Jesus also used a pun. A pun is when you use a word or words that sound the same, but they mean something else. For instance, an English pun would be: "Did you hear about the cross-eyed school teacher who got fired? He couldn't keep his pupils straight." Or "Do you know why a bicycle can't stand up without a kickstand? Because it's two-tired."

Jesus used an Aramaic pun, but we don't get it because it's lost in translation. The words "gnat" and "camel" sound almost the same in Aramaic. The word for gnat is QAMLA and the word for camel is GAMLA. It was almost as if Jesus was like another stand up Jewish comic, Jerry Seinfeld, saying, "And can you believe those Pharisees? They strain out a qamla but they swallow a gamla!"

So why did the Pharisees strain out gnats? Our answer is, "Because gnats are gross, I don't want to swallow a bug either!" That's so obvious, it should be written in the book of First Duh! But for the Jews, there was a more important reason they *had* to strain out gnats. In Leviticus 11, the Bible taught them that all insects were considered unclean or non-kosher. So it was much more

than just an aversion to swallowing a bug; to do so would have made them ceremonially unclean. But Leviticus 11 also pointed out camels were unclean also. There weren't any McCamel restaurants in Israel. So Jesus was saying they strain out the tiniest unclean animal while they unknowingly swallow the largest unclean animal!

With that background, let's ask the question. How does the parable apply to my life? Let's notice a couple of unavoidable truths:

JESUS ENDORSED TITHING AS A GOOD PRACTICE

In verse 23 Jesus observed the Pharisees were so conscientious in their observance they didn't just tithe their money; they even tithed the herbs that grew in their gardens! The word "tithe" is often misunderstood. It's not a religious word, it's a math word. It simply means 10%. It's like the word "quarter" means 25% and the word "half" means 50%. I say that because through the years I've had people say, "I only tithe 5%." That's like saying I halved my apple into fourths! It doesn't make sense.

In Deuteronomy 14 the Jews were instructed to bring a tenth (a tithe) of all the crops they produced and offer it to the Lord. That meant if they harvested ten bushels of grain, one bushel belonged to the Lord. But these hypocrites were so fastidious they counted out the tiniest tithe. I have some mint leaves here that my wife grew in her herb garden. If one of these hypocrites grew ten springs of mint, one belonged to the Lord. Dill seeds and cumin seeds are tiny. Can you imagine these guys going through the tedious process of counting the seeds and making sure God got His tenth?

Some people say tithing is not taught in the New Testament, but in this verse, Jesus put His stamp of approval on it. He said the Pharisees gave the tithe but they neglected the more important issues. Then He said, "You should have done the latter without leaving the former undone. We don't use the words "former" and "latter" very much, so if you're like me you have to stop and think, "Okay, latter is the second set—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. And former is the first one—tithing." Jesus clearly said when it comes to tithing, "don't neglect it" That's the same thing as saying, "do it." I believe, teach, and practice that at least the first 10% of a Christian's income should be returned to the Lord through the local church. Without a doubt, Jesus affirmed tithing.

But the point of his statement has more to do with what they *weren't* doing. They had gotten so wrapped up in tithing, they ignored the really important things. We can make the same mistake also.

WHAT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN TITHING?

Sometimes it's hard to rank the relative importance of the commands in the Bible. But we sometimes think tithing is a pinnacle of spiritual accomplishment. We think only the super-saints tithe. I've been tithing many years and frankly, it's one of the easiest things I do. Since I use online banking, I just have Green Acres set up as a vendor and I make automatic payments. It's easy. But Jesus said there are at least three things that are more important than tithing. He said to

the Pharisees, "You guys think you are spiritual giants because you tithe even your spices. But you're midgets because you have neglected three values more important than tithing." These are three spiritual values we should practice in addition to tithing.

1. JUSTICE: Defend the cause of the weak

When we think of justice, we're tempted to think about retribution. Like you, I was so proud of our American military for going in and taking out the mass murderer Osama Bin Laden this past week. Many people made the comment that justice has been done. But the word Jesus used for justice really isn't about criminal justice or punitive justice. He used the word *krino*. *Krino* means the fair treatment of everyone as equal before God. It is treating everyone as if they are truly valuable to God—and they are.

It's what Isaiah meant when he wrote, "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." (Isaiah 1:17) Biblical justice is standing up for the needs of widows and orphans. That's why our church focuses on loving our widows. Our deacons are assigned widows to watch over and care for. That's why we have a WIN ministry, which stands for Widows in Need.

And thanks to the vision of Rocky Gill and others, we have a ministry called Hope for 100. Our church is now a pacesetter, and we're encouraging other churches to develop an intentional ministry to orphans through adoption and foster care. And justice includes defending the rights of those who can't defend themselves. That's why we stand up for rights of preborn children to live. They have a right to life. These aren't just peripheral ministries of our church; they are core values we embrace.

If God's people don't stand up and defend the cause of the weak, who will? Martin Niemöller was a pastor in Germany during the Nazi rule. He stood by silently and watched as the Nazis continued to eliminate the weak and powerless in the society. When he finally spoke against Hitler he was arrested and imprisoned. He was waiting to be executed when the war ended. He would later write: "First they came for the communists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out for me."

2. MERCY: Help those who are suffering

The word Jesus used for mercy is *eleos*. Mercy is more than just compassion, which means to feel the pain of another. Mercy is putting that compassion into action.

The Bible says, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth." (1 John 3:17-18)

Can't you see these Pharisees bent over their table at home counting out all the spices? They're dividing up the oregano and the basil, the rosemary and garlic. But Jesus' point was that while

they're counting seeds, people are walking by their houses hungry and in need but they ignored them. That's where God expected them to practice their faith, not at the spice rack!

Be careful that you don't become so meticulous in your religious practice that you miss out on the main thing God is calling us to do: Make a difference in the lives of hurting people.

That's why we operate the Good Samaritan Outreach Center where we feed the hungry and clothe people. And that's why I encourage every member of our church to be involved in some kind of ministry that is helping hurting people. That's why we're partners with groups like Mercy Ships, Breckenridge Village, CASA, Habitat for Humanity, and Boy's and Girl's Club. They are on the front lines of showing mercy and we want to be part of this front line action of showing mercy.

3. FAITHFULNESS: Don't put your faith on display; put it in action

Tithing their tiny seeds in the Temple gave the Pharisees a way to display their dedication and holiness for all to see. But it was just a way to show off to others. There's a difference between faith and faithfulness. Faith is something you have and faithfulness is something you do. It means our actions must be consistent with our profession. You can claim to be a person of faith, but if your faith doesn't translate into helping others, then your faith is dead.

James wrote, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:15-16)

Faithfulness means we make a choice to obey all of God's commands. There are over 4,000 commands in the Old Testament. But don't worry, because Jesus summarized all the commands into two: We are to love God with all of our being and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. It's easier to count your seeds than love people because people are often unlovely. You put yourself at risk whenever you love someone.

You can easily give without loving, but you can't love without giving. C.S. Lewis had this to say about love: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

Someone said, "A bell is not a bell until you ring it; A song is not a song until you sing it; and love is not love until you give it away."

TAKE HOME TRUTH: The ministry of helping people is more important than religious activity

So what's the bottom line? God is interested in how you manage His money, and He wants you to honor Him with the tithe. He's interested in every area of your personal life. The websites you look at matter to God. The drugs you're taking? They matter to God. The gossip you're spreading? It matters to God. How you care for His temple, your body? It matters to God. Your personal morality matters to God, but if your concern for personal morality doesn't lead you to help hurting people, you've missed the point.

What's the difference between tithing and justice, mercy, and faithfulness? Tithing is a personal matter between you and God. Justice, mercy, and faithfulness demand that we deal with people—and mainly needy people. It's easy to slip into the lie that the Christian life is only about "me and God." Yes, God wants to have a personal relationship with you, but it's because He wants you to be His hands and feet in this hurting world. God isn't just interested in saving you to take you to heaven. God wants to use you to DO SOMETHING to make a difference in the lives of those who are suffering in this world. Grace is not just a gift you put in your pocket and save it until the day you die so you can bring it out and say, "Okay, let me into heaven." God has showered His grace on you so you can give it away to others.

These words to the hypocrites weren't new. Jesus was simply repeating what the prophet Micah had written centuries earlier. "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:7-8)

God wants you to tithe, but He doesn't just want your money, He wants you. He isn't looking for your religious activity. God is looking at you and saying, "The people of the world are suffering, and what are you going to do about it?"

CONCLUSION

Ivan McGuire was an experienced skydiver with over 800 jumps. In 1988 he was planning to jump and film the other skydivers with a voice-activated camera attached to his helmet. He remembered to turn on his camera and check the batteries, but he forgot the most important thing—he didn't put on his parachute. He fell to his death. Some of the footage from the damaged camera was used by investigators. State Police Captain Ralph Brown investigated his death and commented, "It kind of appears he reached for his parachute and didn't have one. You could only see the instructor and the student falling on the video. The release for his parachute is on his right hip, and when that right hand goes down, it sounded like he might have said, 'Oh no' right after his hand came into view." Captain Brown said he was 99% sure McGuire was never wearing a parachute. He said, "He was so preoccupied with the excitement of taping the show, I think he forgot his parachute." How tragic. He strained at a gnat and swallowed a camel.

The Pharisees didn't get the joke about the gnat and the camel. And even though the joke was on them, it went over their heads. They were too busy counting their tiny seeds to notice there were hurting people around them who needed justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Is the joke on you today? Are you straining out gnats and swallowing camels? When we major on the minors and minor on the majors, we're straining gnats and swallowing camels.

The gnats are the little piddling rules we insist must be followed to be holy. You have to dress a certain way, or carry a certain Bible, or listen to a certain kind of music if you really want to be holy. I've seen gnats destroy churches. I've known people who left a church because they argued about the color of the carpet, or whether the piano should be on the left or the right, and as funny as that may sound, those folks weren't laughing. We are still guilty of straining out camels and swallowing camels.

"I'll take the camel, but hold the gnat?" On second thought, cancel that order. I'm staying away from gnats and camels. And I'm going to feed on God's Word and follow Jesus by practicing justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes