

Date: 23.3.2011

Text: Matthew 23:23 - 28

Place: Midweekchurch

Title: When Jesus gets really angry 3: at false actions

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The good thing for me so far as we've looked at Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees is that I have been able to keep what Jesus said at arm's length. I've been able to pass off what he has said as a good warning. I haven't felt guilty of what the Pharisees were doing. At least that's what I told myself. It's been a good warning of what to avoid and to try and do the positive side.

But as I've thought about tonight's verses in **Matthew 23**, I'm uncomfortable. I've got a nasty feeling that I've strained out a gnat and swallowed a camel. Now that doesn't explain this (my gut) and there aren't any nervous looking camels wandering in my backyard.

So why am I worried?

And what *does* Jesus mean?

Verse 23 begins a new section with a repeat of Jesus' condemnation: **Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!**

Not the best way to win friends and influence people!

But we saw earlier that these men were obstinately refusing to believe Jesus and were seeking to take people away from him. After trying to convince them, Jesus now highlights their danger to people who may be tempted to follow them. Jesus said back in **verse 14** that they are preventing people from entering the kingdom of heaven. And he has been exposing how they do that.

Last week we saw it was in their false *words*.

Tonight we see it in their false *actions*.

In **verse 23** he points out something the Pharisees were no doubt proud of: **You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin.** Throughout the Old Testament God shows how all of life is a gift. Everything we have comes from him. And in **Deuteronomy 14:22** God says, **'Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year.'**

Our food is essential to life, and by in setting aside a tenth to him the Israelites recognised that all of it was a gift from God. And more often than not they were to eat that tenth for God in the place he would set aside as a way of acknowledging his goodness and provision, conscious that all of it is from him.

So the Pharisees took that Law and cranked it up a couple of notches.

They wanted to be *so* right with God that they not only tithed their fields, but even the vegie patch in the back yard, and the herbs growing in the windowsill. You don't have a mint orchard or a dill plantation. You usually only need one plant per household.

But for every nine mint leaves they plucked off the bush, the tenth was set aside for God. That's keen.

But cumin seeds? That's getting out the magnifying glass and tweezers: nine for me, one for God. Nine for me, one for God.

This jar has 33 grams of herbs in it. Now a Pharisee would accurately measure out 3.3 grams, pop it in an envelope and drop it in the offering as his gift to the needy. 'God is pleased with my abundant sacrifice!'

They were unbelievably zealous to fulfil the law. They had an obsession to remain faithful to God's law. They were that committed to obedience!

But Jesus goes on: **But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.**

They were so zealous about their individual morality, but in the process something got lost. Something Jesus says is more important: **Justice. Mercy. Faithfulness.**

Tithing was an appropriate response of thankfulness to God's abundant blessing. But they missed the things that reflect God's character in the world.

Proverbs 18:5 says **It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the innocent of justice.** Justice is seeing wrongs and doing something about it.

Mercy is seeing people in need and doing something about it.

Faithfulness was being true to your word. Living with integrity.

So you can imagine these Pharisees being so zealous to tithe the leaves off one plant in their garden. But they could be guilty of great injustice. They sold widows' houses out from under them, forgetting the claims of mercy.

We saw last week that they made oaths and pledges with the deliberate intention of evading them, forgetting faithfulness.

Jesus says to them **You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former.**

Both are important.

The tithing speaks about our individual morality. Our own walk with God. The things you do at home in private matter to God. So, your thought life matters to God. What you do with your body matters. How you spend money matters. What you do with your time is important. Don't neglect these things. Do them. They matter.

But Jesus says here there are more important matters. The world is suffering in the world and God wants his people to do something about it. Justice, mercy and faithfulness can only be practiced in community, with other people.

Our individual walk with God is important. Our holiness matters to God. But what is more important is bringing justice, mercy, faithfulness to the world!

That's what gets me worried in this passage. Because I've got it the other way around.

I'll do what I need for my personal holiness. But matters of justice are if I can get around to them. If I've got time I'll write that letter to the Prime Minister about the proposed funding of abortions in our aid budget. When and if I have spare cash I'll give it to someone in need.

But Jesus goes on: **You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.**

Jesus hits them with a pun. The word for gnat is *camlah*. The word for camel is *gamlah*. **You strain out a camlah but swallow a gamlah.** Bam! A forceful way of showing their error.

Gnats and camels were unclean animals. The Pharisees put a gauze over their cups to strain out any bugs that would make them unclean. But in their zeal to strain out these tiny things they have swallowed the biggest unclean thing of all.

In being so passionate about the little things they had forgotten, neglected the more important things. And so they negated everything. Jesus calls them white-washed tombs: looking nice and clean on the outside but inside is filthy. By concentrating on the outside things that looked good they covered up the wickedness inside.

So I need to ask myself: How do I strain out a gnat but swallow a camel?

I do it when I am so proud of keeping certain rules I feel I can be excused from others.

When I'm driving I always use my indicator. I always keep left unless overtaking. I never leave my high beams on at oncoming traffic. I never use my fog lights even though I have them. And I hate it when other people do those things. It's not hard people!

So since I'm a more considerate driver than many I see, it's OK for me to speed as long as it's safe. And I can do rolling stops at stop signs.

I've chosen the rules I will follow. And because I'm so good at keeping those ones, I feel that gives me the right to break others. I'm so concerned about the people who break the rules that matter to me I get angry, proud, judgemental, rude, self-righteous.

I strained out a gnat but swallowed a camel.

I can be a keen student of the Bible but spend my money selfishly.

I can be very helpful at church but do nothing around the house where only my family sees me.

I can debate fine points of the Bible but show no love to others, unless I tell them off for their own good.

Some questions to ask ourselves:

1. What minor things could we major on – things important enough in themselves, just not the *more* important things?
2. In what ways can we demonstrate God's passion for justice, mercy and faithfulness?
3. What would you say to someone who says 'It's all about me and God – my faith is something between him and me'