

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 23:23 - 23:24



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg focuses on Matthew 23:23-24, where Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for tithing with meticulousness, but neglecting the more significant matters of the law, such as justice and mercy. Jesus emphasizes that even small sins are not a light matter, and people should not assume that all sins are equal. The discussion concludes with the importance of loving one's neighbor, while tithing should be seen as a means of helping one's fellow Christians rather than a mere religious obligation.

### Transcript

Today we'll be talking about Matthew chapter 23, beginning with verse 23. Matthew 23, 23. And this is in that chapter where Jesus really lets fly his criticisms of the prevailing religious establishment and its leaders and their policies.

He essentially calls the scribes and the Pharisees, who were the religious teachers of the day, hypocrites. He indicates early on in this chapter that they didn't always teach bad things, but they lived their lives in a bad way. He told the disciples that they should actually, for the most part, follow the teachings of these men when they sat in Moses' seat, which was actually a chair in the synagogue where they expounded from the law of God.

He says, go ahead and do what they say, but don't follow their example, because they say and they do not do. And so we have to assume that much of what the Pharisees and scribes taught was not in itself objectionable, but their lives were objectionable. They really had no love for God, and that was exhibited in the inconsistency of their piety.

And in, oh, I suppose beginning at about verse 13, we begin to see Jesus lay out a series of denunciations against these people, usually beginning with these words, woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. He says that again and again, and each time he tells them why he is calling them hypocrites, they'll do certain things which appear to be religious, but then in other ways, maybe other ways far more important to the sincerity of their religion, they are inconsistent and not sincere. Now, here we have in Matthew 23, another one of these woes.

He says, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done without leaving the other undone, blind guides who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel. Well, what's he talking about here? There are a lot of lessons actually in this statement for us all.

I'm sure that it was a very apt denunciation of the practices of the scribes and Pharisees, but there are lessons in this that everyone should pay attention to. In fact, some of the most important thoughts for Christians are to be found in this passage. For example, that Jesus referred to certain things as weightier matters of the law that should not be left undone.

Now, it's clear that Jesus indicated here that in the law of Moses, of course, there were a large variety of things people were told to do. Some of them, Jesus said, are weightier than others. The Pharisees were careful about certain things that were not of the weighty category, things that were, we might even say, trivial, although I don't want to suggest that tithing was trivial because it was quite an important obligation in the Old Testament.

But at the same time, they were relatively trivial relative to the weightier matters of the law. Now, Jesus indicated they should have done both things, the weighty matters and the trivial things that were required of them to do. But it was certainly particularly out of line for them to neglect the most important aspects.

When he says, you strain at a gnat and swallow a camel, of course, he's using a hyperbole. They don't really swallow camels. But what he is saying is this, that an example of the inconsistency in their religion would be if they would strain a gnat out of their drink before drinking it, and yet they would leave a camel in their drink and drink it down.

Now, the reason this would be such an apt illustration is that both gnats and camels were unclean animals. In the Jewish religion, there were certain foods that were unclean, foods they were not allowed to eat. And the Pharisees would be very careful about certain things.

If a gnat would land in their drink, then it would be an unclean animal. They would have to strain it out before they drink it. Now, of course, you and I would want to strain it out before we drink it also, because we would find a bug in our drink loathsome.

But it was not just that it was loathsome to them. It was a matter of religion to them. It was a matter of it would be wrong for them to eat an animal that was unclean, even if it was a tiny little animal.

It would be a tiny infraction of the laws of uncleanness if they would allow a gnat to pass through their lips and to swallow it down with their drink. So they would carefully strain

that out. However, a camel was also an unclean animal.

And therefore, to say that they strain out a gnat but they swallow a camel means that they are scrupulous about things of lesser importance, but they violate in a big way the same law that they keep in other ways. And what he's saying is, of course, if we were to put ourselves under, or if God were to put us under the law of uncleanness and we were not to consume unclean animals, then to allow ourselves to consume a gnat so tiny would be presumably a small offense. In fact, one might do it without knowing he's doing it.

It would be, the gnat is so small, one might be forgiven that he didn't know there was a gnat in his drink or that he was unable to get it out before he drank it. However, to swallow a camel would be an enormous infraction of the same law. And Jesus says that the way the Pharisees lived their lives is very much like that, that they would be careful not to violate the law in small matters, but at the very same time they are in violation of the big matters, the weightier matters of the law.

Let's take a look at what he actually said they do, because there's a fair degree of value to the Christian in seeing how the mistakes the Pharisees made and also what Jesus taught in the context of this denunciation. He said what they did, what the Pharisees actually did do, was pay their tithes of mint and anise and cumin. Now mint and anise and cumin are spices, herbs, and they are not grown in large quantities except by people who are spice farmers.

Certainly the Pharisees were not spice farmers. People who farmed in Israel, more often than not, were going to be growing some kind of grain crop or perhaps would have vineyards or have something that would be consumable as staples in the diet. And certainly the vast majority of their farmland would be devoted to things that would either feed humans or feed livestock.

Insofar as they would grow spices, they would only grow small quantities because spices are used in small quantities. Now tithing is the practice of taking one-tenth of the produce that your land has produced and giving it to the Levites at the temple. This was commanded in the Old Testament that the Israelites should take one-tenth of everything that their land produced and take it to the temple and give it to the Levites there.

And that would become the food and the support for the Levites. Now of course the average person who farmed would have a fair quantity of grain that his land produced and he'd take a tenth of that and he'd give it to the Levites for their support. He would have a very small amount of spices if he grew any at all because they'd grow those for their own tastes and so forth and they would not need very large amounts.

And so they might grow their spices in their window box or in a small portion in their flower bed or something. The spices they would come up with would be extremely small

in quantity. And the idea is that they were so careful to pay their tithes that not only did they pay their tithes of the grain that they produced but they actually were scrupulous about making sure that they separated off even a tenth of these small quantities of herbs that they produced as well.

That's how concerned they were not to violate the tithe command. Now that's good. Jesus said these things you ought to have done.

But he said you should not have left the other undone. As important as it was for them to tithe, it was more important for them to do some other things which they didn't do. Now Jesus said while they were paying their tithe of mint and anise and cumin they were nonetheless neglecting what Jesus called the weightier matters of the law.

The weightier matters of the law. Some things are more important to God in the law than others are. Now by the way, just before I identify the things that Jesus said are the weightier matters of the law and talk about them, it's significant because many people will say and I've often heard people tell me, all sins are equal.

Right? I'm sure you've heard that. This is often brought up when we're talking about maybe some very offensive sins that someone has committed. Maybe someone in the church has committed adultery.

Maybe someone is, maybe we're talking about the issue of homosexuality and its offensiveness to God and so forth. And someone usually in those discussions says, well all sins are about equal and we all sin and therefore if I envy someone or if I have lust in my heart or something it's just as bad as any other sin. Right? Well, in one sense all sins are very corrupt and all sins are very bad because the soul that sins, it shall die.

The Bible doesn't say the soul that commits a very grievous sin shall die. It's just the wages of sin. Sin is death.

If you commit sin, you bring on yourself the penalty of judgment. And therefore sin, even a small sin, is not a light matter. But sin is the transgression of the law.

John tells us this in 1 John 3, 5 or 6 and he says sin is the transgression of the law. Therefore, if you sin in a way that violates a weightier matter of the law, it is a weightier matter. It's a weightier sin.

Not all sins are exactly equal in terms of their weight and how much guilt they incur. It is true even the lightest thing, even the violation of the smallest law of God is a sin worthy of death. But that doesn't mean that some sins don't do more damage than others do.

There are sins that are more damaging. They damage more people. For example, when Jesus said if you look at a woman to lust after her, you've committed adultery already with her in your heart.

Well, Jesus is certainly saying that if you have deliberate lustful thoughts toward a woman who's not your wife, then you are defiling yourself as much as if you committed adultery and you are in violation of God's command as much as if you committed adultery. But some people wrongly assume that well, if I've done that, it makes no difference if I go out and actually commit adultery since it's all the same. But it's not all the same.

Committing adultery in the heart is one thing. Committing adultery physically is yet another. Because when you commit adultery in the heart, you actually violate your purity before God and you need to settle that matter with Him.

But you have not done any physical harm to other people if it has remained within you. It's a sin between you and God to settle. You go out and commit physical adultery and you may destroy families.

You traumatize children. You violate, you know, many people are affected by this. It's a much more heinous crime.

I am not saying that adultery in the heart is not heinous enough. It is sufficiently heinous to damn a person. But that doesn't mean you can't do worse.

There are some things worse than others. And you can see that very clearly as you look at the law in the Old Testament. Since sin is the violation of God's law, you'll find that God prescribes certain penalties for certain violations in the Old Testament.

And one sin, for example, stealing a lamb might be punishable by repaying four lambs. If you get caught, you have to pay back four lambs. That's making restitution with steep interest.

If you stole an ox, I believe you had to pay back five oxen. Actually, a bigger crime. You stole a bigger thing, your penalty is bigger.

It's a bigger crime. It's a more serious infraction. If a man slept with a woman who was not his wife, but she was not anybody else's wife either, the penalty was that they'd have to marry and there'd be no possibility of them divorcing.

On the other hand, if a man slept with a woman who was not his wife and was somebody else's wife, he'd be put to death for that. There were some crimes for which there was a monetary penalty. There were others for which actually you could not pay for it short of giving up your life.

They were capital crimes. There was this life for life as well as stripe for stripe, eye for eye, tooth for tooth standard in the law that certain crimes were paid back in more severe ways. If you strike somebody and knock out their eye, that's bad.

The penalty is you get your eye knocked out. If he loses his hand, you lose your hand. That's bad.

But if he loses his life, you lose your life. Because killing someone is worse than even knocking out their eye. So, not all sins are exactly equal.

And those who say they are, I think have not thought through things very well and don't even agree with what Jesus said. Because Jesus said that to neglect tithing for the Pharisees would have been a sin. It was a sin they did not commit.

They did not neglect tithing. And to neglect it would have been a sin. He says, this you ought to have done.

And they did. So, it's a good thing they didn't violate that command. But it would have been a lighter matter for them to violate that than it was for them to violate a weightier matter like the ones that Jesus mentioned.

So, some issues are bigger issues with God. We can see, for example, that David's adultery which violated a moral law of God. And his having Uriah the Hittite killed, which was like murder, and also violated a moral law of God.

That offended God far more than it offended him when he went into the tabernacle and ate the showbread, which also violated a law of God. David ate the showbread, but that apparently didn't violate any moral issues. It was more of a violation of a ceremonial law.

It was a violation, but it was something that God was willing to overlook because it was not a major issue. And in a sense, it was even justifiable. But murder and adultery are not.

Jesus himself indicated that when David ate the showbread, he was essentially blameless. And he did violate a law, but it was a minor thing. It was a ceremonial law.

And there are some things that override ceremonial laws. For instance, in Malachi, well, we'll talk about Malachi in a moment. I should have turned you somewhere else.

To turn you to Hosea, chapter 6 and verse 6. God said, I will have mercy rather than sacrifice. Now, God had commanded the Jews to offer sacrifices, and he was not overthrowing that system in this statement. I will have mercy rather than sacrifice.

What he is saying is that even though he does require people to offer sacrifices, he has even a higher concern that they show mercy. That mercy is more important than sacrifice to God. Some matters are weightier than others.

Jesus even mentions mercy as one of the weightier matters of the law that was neglected by the Pharisees. So, we have to acknowledge that violation of some things is worse than violation of other things. That doesn't mean that the violation of small

matters in God's economy are to be trifled with, because complete obedience to God is what we really owe him and what he expects us to strive for.

But it's not the same thing. I mean, we can say that even a small sin can send a man to hell. But that doesn't mean it's all the same if he goes ahead and does a big sin.

You see, a small sin may send you to hell if you commit it. A big sin may send you and a bunch of others to hell, because you may stumble others and do serious harm to others. So, not all sins are exactly equal, even though sometimes people say that.

The Bible doesn't say that. Now, what did Jesus refer to as the weightier matters of the law? Now, they were weightier in contrast to tithing. Now, tithing was weighty enough, because when the people neglected their tithing, in Malachi chapter 4, excuse me, Malachi chapter 3, God said that they were robbing God and they had come under a curse for violating the tithe.

Well, that means that even though tithing is a lighter matter than some other things, it is not light at all. That if they neglected their tithes and they robbed God, that was enough to bring them under a curse from God. So, even light matters should not be tolerated.

But there are some things more important to God than that. And they are justice, he says, and mercy and faith. This last word, faith, many translators believe it would be better translated from the Greek, faithfulness.

Now, it is the normal word for faith, but the word faith has a variety of meanings and in some contexts actually means faithfulness or fidelity or integrity or something like that, a reliability, one keeping one's word. I share the conviction of those translators who think it should be translated faithfulness. And as such, I believe that it is a good summary of what love requires, because Jesus said that all the law is summarized in the command to love your neighbors yourself.

I think that loving your neighbors yourself means that you do justly to him, you extend mercy to him, and you deal faithfully with him. If you are unfaithful, you don't keep your promises, you make contracts that you don't fulfill or honor, you are unfaithful and it certainly is unloving. You know that you're being unloving when you do to somebody something you wouldn't want them to do to you.

That's when you know you're being unloving. And you always want people to be just toward you you don't want them to be unfair toward you. You want them to be merciful for you, that is, you want them to overlook your failures as much as possible when you're weak.

And you want them to be faithful with you. You don't want people making promises to you and not keeping them. So these are really the things that consist of loving your neighbor.

You're supposed to love your neighbor as you love yourself. These things, mercy and justice and faithfulness, these are issues of moral weight. Whereas tithing was a matter of ceremonial because it was for the support of the priesthood.

You see, the Levites were supported by the tithes and then they would take a tithe, which means a tenth of what they received, that is the Levites would, and they'd give that to the priests. So this tithing was all part of the support of the tabernacle and the priesthood and so forth. That's what it was for.

This being so, it raises questions as to whether tithing is for us today since there is no such temple or priesthood to support. Now we do know that there is a spiritual temple and that we are all spiritual priests. But the spiritual temple is the body of Christ, the church of Jesus Christ, which is made up of us all.

And if there was tithing required of us and if we were supposed to take it to the temple to support the priests, that would essentially translate into supporting the body of Christ and all believers. So that if I was compelled to tithe and take my gift to the temple to support the priests, I would thereby simply be helping Christians out, any Christians. If I helped some poor Christians and helped them pay their bills, that would be comparable.

That would be helping with the support of the priesthood because we're all priests in the kingdom of God. It's a kingdom of priests. However, the idea of taking one-tenth has never been imposed upon Christians in the New Testament.

There is no place in the New Testament that teaches that Christians must take a tenth of their income and give it anywhere in particular. In fact, the only New Testament text that is ever used to support tithing seems to be this one. Because Jesus said that the Pharisees had paid their tithes and this they should have done without neglecting the other.

Some say, well, see, Jesus told us we should tithe. No, he didn't tell us we should tithe. This was not addressed to his disciples.

This was addressed to the Jewish religion. He said they did pay their tithes and that is something they should have done. Well, that's not the same thing as saying it's something that Christians are supposed to do.

He's just affirming that when they paid their tithes they were doing their duty as persons living under the law. But they should not have neglected more important duties. We know that what is imposed upon Christians are these more important duties, justice and mercy and faithfulness.

And these are the things for which people will be judged particularly by the teachings of Christ rather than simply the teachings of Moses. These are the weightier matters. God will have mercy rather than sacrifice he said in Hosea.



And Jesus said the weighty matters are justice, mercy and faithfulness.