

Straining Out Gnats

by David Servant

David Servant's sermon emphasizes the importance of prioritizing love, justice, mercy, humility, and faithfulness over lesser religious practices.

Scripture: Micah 6:8, Matthew 5:19, Matthew 23:23, John 13:35, John 14:15, 1 Corinthians 13:1, Galatians 5:14, 1 John 3:14

Topics: "Christian Living", "True Spirituality"

Description

David Servant emphasizes the importance of not neglecting the weightier commandments of justice, mercy, humility, and faithfulness while also highlighting the significance of loving others as a primary Christian responsibility. He contrasts majoring on minor commandments with minoring on major ones, stressing the need for self-denying love and action over mere ritualistic practices. Servant points out that true spirituality is expressed through continuous acts of justice, mercy, humility, and faithfulness, reflecting a living relationship with God.

Transcript

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:19, emphasis added).

Jesus obviously believed that there were lesser commandments, as revealed in the quote above. He therefore must have also believed that there were greater commandments.

To their credit, the scribes and Pharisees kept the lesser commandments, yet Jesus condemned them for ignoring the greater ones:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (Matt. 23:23-24).

God has made both little gnats and big camels. Likewise, He has given some "weighty" and "less-weighty" commandments. None should be neglected, but the person who gives all his attention to God's minor commandments and ignores the major ones is like the man who finds both a gnat and a camel in his soup,

and who removes the former and swallows the latter.

Majoring on minors and minoring on majors is a fault that is universal among pharisaic and religious people, whose spirituality consists of doing what costs very little, and what is likely to be ritualistic rather than heart-felt. Going to church and paying tithes are normally high on their list. Yet notice in the just-quoted scripture that Jesus put tithing in the "less-weighty" category. As far as the biblical record is concerned, that one instance is the only time He mentioned tithing during His entire earthly ministry. And He never once uttered a word about attending church services. (He did say we should make disciples and love one another, which certainly require gathering together and interaction, but honestly, how much Luke 14:25-35 discipleship and self-denying love occurs in the average church service?)

Of greater importance, notice what Jesus listed in the "weightier" category: justice, mercy and faithfulness. These should have been no surprise to His hearers who knew Scripture. In the Old Testament, at least two of those three were listed as being "weighty" by the prophet Micah:

He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 6:8).

I love verses that simplify spirituality, don't you?

Let's combine Jesus' and Micah's lists of "weighty commandments," which then gives us a list of four: justice, mercy, humility and faithfulness. I wonder, how many of us would list those four as our foremost Christian responsibilities? Is it not more likely that church attendance, Bible reading, prayer, and tithing (all good things, of course) would be highest on our list? Notice that those four are all things that we can "check off our list" once they've been done according to our predetermined schedule, whereas justice, mercy, humility and faithfulness are things that we must strive to walk in continually. That is a revealing contrast between what can amount to dead religious works and what characterizes a living relationship with God. The Pharisees attended religious services, studied Scripture, prayed long prayers and tithed...and then went to hell.

Because they are all so "weighty" in God's eyes, let's briefly consider what it means to walk in justice, mercy, humility and faithfulness.

(1) Justice: "To do justice" implies treating everyone fairly, showing no partiality, and taking no bribes. It implies working against injustice, always being honest, and exposing what is evil (see Eph. 5:11). In the Old Testament, "doing justice" is sometimes associated with caring for the rights of orphans, widows and strangers (see Deut. 24:7, 27:19). It has always been a "weighty" commandment: "To do righteousness and justice is desired by the Lord rather than sacrifice" (Prov. 21:3, emphasis added).

Who is benefitting because of your "doing justice"?

(2) Mercy: The Hebrew word for "mercy" found in Micah's list is perhaps better translated "kindness," and in Jesus' list the Greek word can also be translated "pity" or "compassion." Meeting people's pressing needs, sharing our resources with the poor, and visiting the sick and incarcerated all fall into this category. Jesus once quoted from the prophet Hosea to emphasize the "weightiness" of compassion. Once again rebuking the Pharisees for straining out gnats and swallowing camels, He said,

But if you had known what this means, "I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice," you would not have condemned the innocent (Matt. 12:7, emphasis added).

The Pharisees were sure to bring their sacrifices to the temple, but they had little compassion for hurting people, just like those whom Hosea condemned in his day.

You will recall that when Jesus once illustrated the concept of loving one's neighbor, He told a story about someone who showed mercy. A good Samaritan had compassion upon a wounded crime victim, expending his time and treasure to help him. That victim had been ignored by two very religious men, a priest and Levite, who each doubtlessly could have quoted the second greatest commandment--but who didn't keep it (see Luke 10:25-37).

Are you more like the good Samaritan--or the priest and Levite? Who is benefiting because of your compassion?

(3) Humility: God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (see 1 Pet. 5:5). The humble live with an understanding of their dependency upon God. Humility also means considering others as being more important than ourselves and serving them (see Phil. 2:3-4). Proud people expect to be served. One of the very last things Jesus emphasized to His closest disciples was that they should wash each other's feet, humbly serving each other, following His example. In God's eyes, the servants are the greatest (see Matt. 23:11).

Whom are you humbly serving?

(4) Faithfulness: Being faithful implies keeping your promises, being consistent, and persevering when you feel like quitting. Generally speaking, it is impossible to be faithful unless you are tempted to be unfaithful. Faithful people earn the trust of God and others.

Do people who know you trust you?

For the most part, justice, mercy, humility and faithfulness are four aspects of another commandment, and one that Jesus said should be second highest on our list--loving our neighbor as ourselves (see Matt. 22:39). The only greater commandment is to love God with all our hearts. Yet how does one love God with all his heart? How is love for God expressed? Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15), and John wrote, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments" (1 John 5:3). This being so, we keep the greatest commandment by keeping the rest of the commandments. And according to Scripture, keeping the second-greatest commandment fulfills all the rest (see Matt. 7:12, 22:40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14).

Thus it could be rightly stated that to follow Jesus is to be a lover of others! How much more simple can it get? Of course, the kind of love of which I am speaking is more than just a feeling. It is a self-denying love that results in action.

Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the preeminence of loving others, especially fellow believers, above all other duties. Love is the camel that the gnat-focused Pharisees ignored. Love is the camel that all religious people ignore, including pharisaic "Christians," who are continually straining out gnats. What are some of those gnats? Read Paul's thoughts on the subject:

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing (1 Cor.

13:1-3).

Speaking in tongues, prophecy, and mountain-moving faith can all become strained gnats when love is missing. To be in the presence of people who are focused on such things--while self-denying love is absent--is as pleasant as sitting next to a clanging cymbal.

Did you notice a few other strained gnats that Paul mentioned? Two are (1) understanding mysteries and (2) having knowledge. Doctrine, even right and good doctrine, is meaningless apart from love. Theologians and Bible scholars beware! You are, according to Scripture, absolutely nothing without love. Some of the nastiest people I've ever met are those whose Christianity consists solely of doctrines they defend, who are ready to pounce on anyone who differs in even some minor matter. They can prove their points using Bible verses, but orphans and widows will starve waiting for a crumb from their tables.

Being a Christian is not defined by what you know or say you believe--it is defined by what you are and what you do. Doctrine that cannot be translated into action is utterly useless. Reading your Bible every day amounts to nothing if you don't do what is most important to God--love others.

But am I saying that doctrine is unimportant? No. Am I saying that giving to the poor is the only important thing? No. According to Paul, giving to the poor, if done for a motivation other than love--to be seen by others, for example, or to receive your "hundred-fold blessing"--also amounts to nothing (see 1 Cor. 13:3).

How important is loving others? Love for other believers is the mark of being born again (see 1 John 3:14). Without love, one proves he is not truly born again (see 1 John 3:14, 4:8).

How important is loving others? Our love for each other identifies us to the world as being Christ's disciples:

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35, emphasis added).

Along those same lines, our love for one another is what will convince the world, above anything else, of the truth of the gospel, which is why Jesus prayed,

...that they may all be one...that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me....that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me... (John 17:21, 23, emphasis added).

This being so, preaching the gospel itself can become a strained gnat if love is absent. The most effective evangelists are lovers. Both Jesus' and Paul's ministries were characterized not by just preaching the gospel, but by caring for the poor (see John 13:29; Gal 2:10). And how strange it seems for a pastor to preach the gospel while a denominational sign stands in front of his church, broadcasting to everyone who passes by, "We do not want you to associate us with other Christians who hold slightly different doctrinal beliefs." If I put a sign in front of my house that says, "My name is David Servant, and I'm a Republican!," and the next day my wife puts a sign beside mine that says, "I am Becky Servant, and I'm a Democrat," what might my neighbors conclude about our love for one another?

How important is it that we love one another? If we allow the flesh to overcome the Spirit and yield to "enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, and factions" (Gal. 5:20)--all indications of a lack of love--Paul warns us, "those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21). Jesus likewise warned that the disciple who hatefully calls his brother a fool, "shall be

guilty enough to go into the hell of fire" (Matt. 5:22). Thus if one is presenting his offering at the altar and remembers that his brother has something against him, he should leave his offering at the altar (stop focusing on the gnat), and be reconciled with his brother (no longer ignoring the camel; see Matt. 5:23-24).

How important is it to love one another? Jesus will not one day say to the sheep on His right, "You went to church...you paid your tithes...you read your Bible...you didn't smoke...your understanding of the Trinity was accurate...you had the timing of the Rapture figured out...you read only from the King James Version...your worship music was really good" or a thousand other things that seem to be what is most important to so many. Rather He will say, "I was hungry...I was thirsty...I was naked...I was sick...I was in prison...I was a stranger...and you proved your love for Me by loving the least of My brothers and sisters, expending your time and treasure." Self-denying love, or our lack of it, will reveal if we are sheep or goats at the judgment.

Church tradition tells us that the apostle John lived to be a very old man in Ephesus, where, during the last years of his life, he was carried by the disciples to the church gatherings because of his frailty. At those meetings he was accustomed to say no more than, "My dear children, love one another." His disciples, eventually weary of always hearing him say the same thing asked, "Master, why do you always say this?" "It is the Lord's command," was the reply of this elderly spiritual giant. "And if this alone be done, it is enough!"

In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 7:12, emphasis added)

For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:14, emphasis added).

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