

Straining Out Gnats while Swallowing Camels¹

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Introduction:

Picture a man for a moment. He has a great job and has put his wife in a nice house. He and his wife drive new cars. They wear designer clothes, always fashionable. You are impressed because he always speaks to his wife with terms of endearment: dear, sweetheart, love of my life. Of course, you were shocked one day when his wife called while he was out golfing with you and he responded to her, "Love of my life, you know that nothing is more important to me than my golf game, you can call the plumber yourself and don't bother me again for the next two hours. Goodbye. I love you, sweetheart." He watched Gary Smalley's videos on marriage and learned that his wife needs at least five non-sexual touches each day. He shoots for six just in case he miscounts. He received one of those chain e-mails that talked about a couple who left little love notes for each other all over the place. Every day he dutifully hides a note for his wife to find. You happened to be there when she found the one that said, "See how much I love you? By the way, if you don't take my suit to the dry cleaner today, you'll be sorry." He read Chapman's book on the five love languages and knows his wife is an "acts of service" person. So, he dutifully does the dishes at least three times per week. He takes the trash out without being asked. He does a load of laundry every morning before going to work, that is, when he comes home from work instead of staying there overnight, which he has been doing more and more frequently. He always buys her nice gifts for special days and even picks up some memento on days that have no special meaning. He especially buys her gifts after he has slapped her during one of their fights. He has promised to never leave the house without saying, "I love you." He never does. He even says, "I love you," when he is storming out because they've had a fight and has accused her of being an idiot, stupid, a worthless mother, a pain in the neck. He may be rolling his eyes, speaking sarcastically and mumbling, but he says it. He especially makes sure to say, "I love you," on the way out the door when he's heading over to his mistress's house to have an afternoon tryst.

Do you see a problem with this husband? He's definitely getting some of the details right. In fact, during their one trip to meet with the marriage counselor all he could talk about was how he gets those details right and she just doesn't appreciate what he does for her even when he doesn't really like her. But that's the problem isn't it. God hasn't asked him to get a list of details right; He has asked him to love his wife (**Ephesians 5:25**) and live with her in an understanding way (**I Peter 3:7**). He's missing the boat.

We easily see how messed up this is in a marriage relationship. However, do we ever have this same kind of problem when it comes to our relationship with God? Do we ever fixate on how we are observing minor details while letting the major principles go to the wayside? "Surely not," we think, "Nobody would do that because it would be too obvious." Yet, Jesus knew folks who did that. He clearly thought it was enough of a danger to warn everyone for all time against it because He included His rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees on the matter in **Matthew 23:23-24**. Just as the husband we have talked about needs to seriously take a look at the big picture of his marriage and his role within it, we need to take a look at our relationship with God, making sure that we don't strain out gnats while we swallow camels.

Discussion:

- I. Of course, we should strain out gnats.
 - A. Before we delve into what Jesus did teach here, we need to recognize what Jesus did not teach. Jesus did not teach the Pharisees to swallow gnats while straining out camels. In **Matthew 23:23**, Jesus said they should have emphasized the weightier matters of the law, while not neglecting the minor details as well.
 - B. Jesus demonstrates that all of God's word is important. In the Law of Moses tithing was usually about livestock and the harvest (**Deuteronomy 14:22-23**). But one statement is made in **Leviticus 27:30** that teaches tithing the seeds of the land. The scribes and Pharisees apparently used that verse as a demonstration of real righteousness. They didn't simply tithe their herds and produce, they tithed down to their kitchen spices. Someone might say, "Oh come on,

¹ Special thanks to Shane Scott. I heard his recent lesson "The Weightier Matters of the Law" at the Rolling Hills Church of Christ on this passage. It prompted my study of the verse and this lesson as well.

scribes and Pharisees, don't worry at all about those details. Just focus on the bigger picture." But Jesus didn't say that. He said they should have done the weightier things while also getting the details right.

- C. All of God's word is important. The sum of God's word is truth (**Psalm 119:160**). According to **Leviticus 11:20-25**, gnats were unclean. They should be strained out. Even small things can defile.
- II. Straining out camels is more important than straining out gnats.
- A. According to **Leviticus 11:4**, camels were also unclean. Jesus used a word picture Jews could truly appreciate. They would envision someone drinking through a cloth to strain out gnats lest they be defiled, while sharpening their knives to dig into a camel.
 - B. The point behind Jesus' picture shocks me. Tithing was a matter of God's Law. However, Jesus says very clearly tithing was not as important in God's Law as justice, mercy, and faithfulness. I get that all of God's word is important. I expect Jesus to say that. But Jesus also says not all of God's word is equally important. There are weightier matters, which means there are also lighter matters.
 - C. This was not new. Jesus' statement should not have been all that shocking to these teachers of the Old Law. In **Hosea 6:6**, God said He desired mercy and not sacrifice. Of course God wanted sacrifice. He proscribed it in the Law. But more importantly, He wanted mercy. In **Micah 6:6-8**, God said He didn't desire sacrifices and gifts (would tithing be included in this?) but wanted justice, kindness, and walking humbly with God. These three things almost perfectly mirror Jesus' statement of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. In **Psalm 15**, God spoke of who would dwell on His holy hill. He didn't mention tithing or dietary laws. Instead, he mentioned those who practice justice: that is, they did not slander, do evil to their neighbor, or take a bribe against the innocent. He mentioned those who practice mercy: that is, they did not put their money out at interest. He mentioned those who were faithful: that is, they swore to their own hurt, but did not change. Jesus was not describing some logical conclusion the Jews should have come to through deep study of the Law, but was referring to very direct statements.
 - D. Consider some weightier matters for us as Christians:
 - 1. When it comes to proclaiming the gospel, what must carry more weight? Paul answers that in **I Corinthians 15:1-11**, explaining we must preach the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ "as of first importance." In **I Corinthians 2:2**, he said he determined to know nothing among the Corinthians but "Jesus Christ and him crucified." Is this the only thing Paul preached to them? Of course not. In this letter, he talked about unity, miraculous gifts, baptism, congregational discipline, foods offered to idols. But what was the anchor? What received the primary importance? What was the foundation? The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. That must be the weightiest part of our preaching lest we think the weightiest part of Christianity is our own strength and work.
 - 2. When it comes to God's commandments, what must carry the most weight? Jesus answered that very clearly for us in **Matthew 22:36-40**. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus didn't bat an eye. He didn't say, "Greatest commandment, what are you talking about? They're all equal." He said, "Love God with your all and love your neighbor as yourself." Notice what Paul said about this in **I Timothy 1:5**, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (ESV). Love is the aim of our charge, the goal of our instruction, the point behind what we teach. It is the weightier matter of our teaching. Just as loving our wives is the fundamental weighty teaching for husbands and not simply making sure to give her eight hugs every day, loving God and our fellow man is more weighty than the discussion about outward expressions of that love.
 - 3. When it comes to our response to God, what must carry the more weight? Jesus demonstrated the answer to this in **Mark 7:1-23**. The Pharisees and scribes had questioned Jesus about why His disciples didn't wash their hands before they ate. Jesus rebuked these men for hypocrisy and claimed they honored him with their lips, but not with their heart. Then He called the people to him and drove the point home. Those external things didn't matter nearly as much as the heart. What was weightier? The response of the heart not the mouth.

- E. There are weightier matters. We need to give primary importance and emphasis to straining out the camels or straining out the gnats won't do us any good, which leads to our next point.

III. Straining out gnats won't make up for swallowing camels.

- A. In **Matthew 23**, Jesus demonstrated how the Pharisees and scribes swallowed camels.
 - 1. They neglected justice. **Matthew 23:14** said they devoured widows houses. A major aspect of justice in the Old Testament was helping widows (cf. **Deuteronomy 27:19**).
 - 2. They neglected mercy. **Matthew 23:4** said they laid heavy burdens on people that they were not even willing to lift themselves. That is not mercy; that is cruelty.
 - 3. They neglected faithfulness. **Matthew 23:16-19** said they developed elaborate formulas by which they didn't actually have to be faithful to their word.
- B. However, they were meticulous in their tithing. What a burden it must have been to pull out a jar of cumin and count through the grains, removing one out of every ten for the Lord. Surely only the super righteous would go through such burdensome activity. Yet, Jesus is very plain, straining those gnats didn't make up for swallowing the camels. These men were heading for a titanic disaster. While their spiritual ship was sinking, they were busy arranging the deck chairs. Jesus is saying, "Who cares? Who cares if you tithed spices? You weren't My servants. The things that mattered most to Me didn't matter to you."
- C. Can we do this same kind of thing? I've heard of those who would argue tooth and toenail about attending all the assemblies of a congregation, but the rest of the week they were involved in unethical business practices. I've known preachers who could really shell the corn about the need for modest apparel, but they were committing fornication. I've heard men debate the finer details of the work of the church, but do so while completely ignoring the Christian character of brotherly love, kindness, and compassion.
- D. One place I fear this can easily happen is when we so emphasize God's pattern for the local church that it appears we almost de-emphasize the individual's work. I think I've done that when I have preached against the social gospel. I'm always happy to point out there is no authority for the local church to be involved in social welfare. I've heard and preached great lessons explaining why the church's job is not coat closets and soup kitchens, orphan's homes and schools. I fear, for me, that has sometimes become simply a matter of pattern, a technical decision based on the three point plan for establishing authority. But what is the weighty matter here? According to **Titus 2:14**, Jesus died to separate Christians out to be zealous for good deeds. In our sermons, we drive home that **Galatians 6:10** is for individuals, not congregations. We may get the pattern for the local church absolutely right when it comes to the social gospel and avoiding unauthorized congregational activity, but if we aren't doing what God set us apart for as individuals, then we'll be straining out the gnats while swallowing the camels. Keeping the gnats clear won't make up for the fact that we swallowed those camels.
- E. I knew of a preacher about 10 years ago who was among the most stalwart of maintaining the pattern for issues of worship, work, organization of the local church. He could debate with the best of them on issues of modesty, dancing, mixed swimming. He could write scathing articles about what a church could and could not do. All of this came crashing down when his wife found a credit card bill wracked up with charges for strip clubs and prostitution. After the light was shed on this and he had repented, my friend Max Dawson met with him. The brother described his two selves. He had his day self and his night self. The day self knew how to dot the Is and cross the Ts. The night self was full of immorality. He confessed that he had convinced himself that since his day self was so righteous, it made up for his night self. **Ephesians 4:20-24** says Jesus died to change us on the inside. He didn't die to make sure we accomplished some external forms properly. Getting those external forms right wouldn't make up for not changing internally. In fact, since he didn't change internally, it finally destroyed him externally as well. Sadly, the brother fell again later and completely left the Lord and His church. Why? Because since he still hadn't change internally, he finally gave up on the externals.
- F. Christians can and do strain out gnats while swallowing camels, but getting some of the Ts crossed will not make up for ignoring the weightier matters.

IV. Straining out gnats is tempting because it is easily quantified.

- A. Though it was a great burden to do something like pluck one grain of cumin or one leaf of mint for every ten, it was actually easier to emphasize that than the weightier matters. Why? Because gnats such as tithing are easily measured while camels such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness are not. The Pharisees and scribes could very easily tell when they'd given enough. All they had to do was be able to count to ten. But when had they practiced enough justice? Enough mercy? Enough faithfulness?
- B. How do we measure the appropriate response of the heart to God? How do we measure the right amount of love for God or others? It is too easy to turn those kinds of discussions into, "I know I love God more because I attend more assemblies, I give more, I read the Bible more, I can articulate the right doctrines with the right words." It is so easy to rely on these outward forms and rituals to make us think we are right with God. It is easy to strain out gnats because that is so measurable. Straining out camels is hard, because the things that matter most to God are not as easily quantifiable.
- C. We naturally want to quantify and systemize things because it makes us feel better. We know there are five steps to salvation. We delineate three works of the church. We teach three ways to establish biblical authority. We quantify five acts of worship. Why do we so naturally tend to these systemizations? Because they make things easy. They provide us a simple place to camp out doctrinally. Sadly, many camp out around these systemizations without actually doing the study that produced them. They then camp out on the man made constructs without knowing the big picture Bible principles that produced them. Take the five acts of worship, for instance. Where does the Bible say there are five acts of worship? It doesn't. What does the Bible say? The Bible provides the weighty matter of worshipping God in spirit and truth (**John 4:24**). Why are we so attracted to "five acts of worship?" Because it is easily quantified. It is so much easier to know when we have done one of the five acts than to know when we've worshipped God in spirit and truth. Sadly, because of our "five acts" construct (which I'm personally not even sure is completely accurate), some people strain out the gnats of checking off those five acts without ever worshipping in spirit and truth.
- D. I can't help but think of churches I've heard of having major knock down drag-out fights complete with name-calling, backbiting, gossip, and slander over how to handle the announcements because that is not one of the five acts of worship. They are arguing to defend a simplified construct while allowing God's plea for unity, love, kindness, self-sacrifice, and compassion to go by the wayside. It is easy to quantify "five acts;" it is not so easy to quantify loving the brother or sister with whom you disagree.
- E. Consider two biblical examples that demonstrate this struggle.
1. In **Matthew 12:1-8**, the Pharisees rebuked Jesus because his disciples plucked the heads of grain on the Sabbath. To the Pharisees, that seemed like a clear violation of the Law. After all, if the farmer plucked his field on the Sabbath, they would stone him, and they would have been right under the Old Covenant law. Jesus didn't do what I want Him to. I want him to quantify. How many grains could they pluck before it became a violation of the Sabbath Law? He simply described a principle: The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Now how do we measure that? How do we quantifiably know when we've accurately followed that principle? I'm not sure we do. I think it simply drives us to draw closer to God as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling.
 2. In **Luke 10:25-37**, when Jesus taught that the greatest laws were loving God and loving our neighbor, the lawyer wanted further explanation. "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus didn't do what a lawyer wanted to hear. The lawyer wanted something quantifiable. "My neighbor is anyone from my home town" or "anyone who lives within a mile of my dwelling" or "anyone who is a Jew." Instead, Jesus told a story that leaves us with numerous questions even today. He told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. When have we done what that parable teaches properly and enough? I can't preach on that parable without someone asking me if they have to stop and help every person they see with a flat tire on the road or pick up every hitchhiker because that is so dangerous. I don't know the answer to those questions. I only know the weighty principle that we are to love our neighbors.
- F. What I learn from this is that it will always be tempting to strain out gnats no matter how burdensome because that is so easily quantifiable. It will always be easy to swallow camels because

they are so hard to quantify. That is why we must always be on our guard to maintain the proper emphasis.

- V. If we strain the camels properly, we'll stain the proper gnats (but it doesn't work the other way around).
 - A. When we get the weightier matters right, the lighter matters follow. In **Matthew 23:23-24**, if the Pharisees and scribes placed the proper emphasis on faithfulness, wouldn't the matter of tithing faithfully have followed? According to **Matthew 22:36-40**, love was not the greatest commandment because it was better than the rest of the commandments and needed to be followed while the others could be ignored, but because when we get love right, the rest of the commandments follow. In **Mark 7:14-23**, working on the heart instead of the externals was weightier because when we respond from the heart correctly, we'll improve in the right actions.
 - B. The reverse is not true. We can strain out gnats all day long but still swallow camels just as the Pharisees did. I tend to think if I emphasize the details, we'll get the big picture right. But it doesn't work that way. Rather, when we emphasize God's weighty principles, we'll start getting the details that matter right. It may take time to grow there, but it will happen. As hard as it is for me to grasp it, I have to accept what Jesus teaches. When we give proper emphasis to the weightier matters, lighter matters will follow. For instance, we can focus on "five acts of worship" all day long and never worship in spirit and truth, but if we focus on spirit and truth, we'll get the actions right.

Conclusion:

Let's make sure we are putting the proper emphasis on the proper issues at the proper times. Only that way will we actually preach the whole counsel of God properly.