

The Weightier Matters (Part 1): Introduction

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In one chapter, Matthew 23, Jesus Christ rips the scribes and Pharisees to shreds. Eight times He pronounces on them *woe*—defined by *Webster's Dictionary* as "deep suffering, grief, affliction, ruinous trouble." He dubs them "hypocrites" seven times, "blind guides" twice, "fools and blind" twice, "blind" once, "whitewashed tombs" once and finishes His name-calling tirade by designating them "brood of vipers"!

He then accuses them of being the children of those who had killed the prophets—a heavy-duty insult considering how proud they were of their ancestry. He predicts they would do the same themselves and declares that He would have nothing to do with them until they accept and bless the ones He sends.

Jesus was really worked up over this! Why? These people were extremely careful in keeping every minor article of the law. They even added many precise rules themselves to ensure they did not overlook the law's details.

Their lives, and the lives of those under their jurisdiction, consisted of endless, mindless details. Endless, for they continued to break branches of the law down to twigs down to leaves. Mindless, because this focus hampered their ability to think and properly weigh what was *most* important. They became so involved in making sure *everyone else* obeyed their demands that they no longer remembered the fundamental purpose of the law or kept it properly themselves. Even worse, they used the law against others and took advantage even to the point of "devouring widows' houses" (verse 14). Hence Christ's remonstrance: Hypocrites!

Yet they LOOKED good, publicly counting their mint, cummin and anise. It is not wrong or unlawful to count each seed; tithing *should* be done, as Christ pointed out (verse 23). But there are far more important issues of the law to consider than counting individual seeds—namely, JUDGMENT, MERCY AND FAITH.

In this series of articles, we will examine these weightier matters. We will see that Christ would have been much happier had they more efficiently tithed "one measure for you, nine for me" or "one wagon-load for you, nine for me," using the time saved from counting each seed on weightier matters.

Basic Pharisaism

We will first examine Christ's scathing indictment of the Pharisees' religion and reduce each of His points to its basic elements to summarize its effects:

- » They set a horrid example by not following their own teaching (verse 3).
- » They abused their office by burdening others with strict requirements while not requiring the same of themselves (verse 4).
- » What they did do was only for vanity and show (verse 5).
- » They were social climbers (verse 6).
- » Their teaching had negative results, driving people farther from the Kingdom rather

than closer to it (verse 13).

- » Their twisted reasoning led them to steal even from the weak (verse 14).
- » Their misguided zeal made their proselytes twice as bad as they were before they were even "converted" to Pharisaism (verse 16).
- » Gold, money and greed became their main focus and god (verses 16-18).
- » Their perspective was so perverted that they would pay more attention to keep from swallowing a gnat than they would a camel (verses 23-24).
- » How others saw them was far more important than moral values (verses 27-28).
- » While they extolled the virtues of past men of God, they were so deeply hateful and murderous that they would kill Christ and any of His followers that they could (verses 29-37).
- » Their religious house was utterly worthless and desolate, bereft of any contact with or influence of God, though they thought they were perfectly righteous. In a word, they were self-righteous.

We could easily break these attitudes down into many more categories of sin, but the point is obvious: The total of all their religious efforts was zero. Zilch. Actually, Pharisaism had *negative value*, for the scribes and Pharisees took what people already had and made them even worse off than before!

At this point we could boil their performance with the law down to one word, but we will wait for that distillation until after examining each of the weightier matters Christ specifically noted they were omitting. For in them—and linking them in sequence—lies the answer to the fundamental problem of the scribes, Pharisees and their ilk.

The Law of Liberty

Interestingly, of the three "weightier matters" Christ says to focus on—judgment, mercy and faith—only one is even mentioned in the Ten Commandments. Mercy is not listed as one of the Ten or emphasized as a major tenet, but as a blessing from God to the thousands who keep His law (Exodus 20:6).

How then, do these three virtues carry such weight with the law? The Pharisees were in horrendous spiritual condition. Notice that Christ did not simply say, "You are breaking the law—keep it!" They *had* the law, and they allegedly *kept* it, ever so minutely. The problem was that they had completely lost the meaning and purpose of the law! Rather than it being a joy and benefit to them, it had become a burden grievous to be borne and unhealthy to their spiritual state.

God intends the law to be "the law of liberty" (James 1:25; 2:12). If a person looks into it and obeys, he is liberated from guilt, shame, feelings of worthlessness, self-pity, abandonment and loneliness. In short, we can only obtain joy and happiness when we keep the law with God's intended spirit and attitude. Any other use of the law or the breaking of it leads to negative effects that preclude joy and happiness.

They had taken what Jesus and His Father had instituted as a blessing and turned it into a curse. Paul, "a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6) recognized how the law could become an enemy: "And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death" (Romans 7:10). When the law is applied wrongly, the consequences are always destructive.

The scribes and Pharisees used the law on others like a club and perverted it for their own selfish gain. "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble" (James 1:27). How could anyone, by any stretch of the imagination, reason a way to turn this around to the point he could turn widows and orphans out of their homes, then stand in the streets as if righteous, making long prayers to God?

Is it any wonder Christ denounces them so harshly? Considering the content and repetition in His vilification, Jesus Christ is as incensed at them as perhaps anyone He ever addresses in the Bible, Old or New Testament. After calling them snakes in Matthew 23:33, He questions if there is any way they can escape eternal damnation!

Yet in His righteous anger, He still gives them insight on how to correct their course, to put them back on track regarding the spirit and attitude necessary to keep the law properly. Christ intends His instruction to cause us to *think through* three basic elements of the purpose of that law and how it should work to man's good.

To the Pharisees, He did not explain the relationship of judgment, mercy and faith to the law. Why cast His pearls before swine? But if they would make the effort, He gave them a clue about how to straighten out their thinking. In so doing, they would re-establish the law's purpose and meaning and gain correct perspective in how to keep it. History shows they did not take the hint.

In this series we will examine each of these three "weightier matters" to help ensure we have the right perspective on the law and use it for its intended purposes.