

“Whether is Greater?”

Matthew 23:16-23

Most modern ministers who only emphasize the positive aspects of Jesus’ teaching, avoid Matthew 23 like the plague. In Matthew 23, Christ denounces the religious leaders of Israel as hypocrites for their outward show of religion, but had no inward heart for God. They failed to discern what is most important in their religious activities.

Everything they were doing involved what was going on at the temple. The Temple was built for God (Ex. 25:8). God always desired to live among us, but He could not because of our sinful condition. So, He authorized the building of a “sanctuary”—a sanctified place—a place set apart—so He might dwell there among His people.

Approaching the Temple there was a wall, surrounding the Temple. Inside there was a holy place, and further inside was the Holy of Holies where God met with the High Priest of the people. Obviously, the only thing that made this “building” sacred was the presence of God. Without God, the temple was just another building.

- In the New Testament, every believer is the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16). Apart from God dwelling in your body, you are just another lump of animated dirt that will one day return to dust.

I. Their DISTORTED values (vs. 16-22)— “...whether is greater...”

- ➡ To “swear” meant to make a oath, promise, or vow to do a certain thing. It was actually a conditional curse a person would call down on himself from God if he did not keep his promise.
- ➡ The Pharisees perverted the Scriptures to create a “loophole” to make an oath non-binding.

They taught if someone swore by the temple or the altar, they would not have to keep their promise. [Like making a promise with their fingers crossed.] But if a man swore by the gold in the temple or the gift on the altar, he was bound to keep that promise. This was entirely a man-made regulation motivated by greed. The Pharisees wanted the gold and the gift for themselves.

A. GOLD versus the temple (vs. 16-17).

1. *“The temple that sanctifieth the gold”*— To sanctify means to make sacred/holy/set apart. Gold had no holiness in itself, but what it derived from its attachment to the temple. In any other place, it would be just a piece of gold. It was foolish, to think the gold was more holy than the temple, from which it received its sanctity.
2. The Pharisees elevated the *gold* over the Temple because they were covetous (Luke 16:14). The Temple was not as important to them as the gold was (Ex. 37:2, 11, 22, 23). To them, the gold was worth more than the purpose of the Temple—The worship of God. These men were not interested in worshipping God—they were greedy for gain.

B. GIFTS versus the altar (vs. 18-19).

1. What was more important, the gift or the altar that the gift is placed upon? Christ teaches the same lesson as the gold/Temple scenario—The Pharisees could not eat the altar, but they could eat the “gift” offered on the altar.

RUCKMAN: “These two illustrations reveal that the greatest and foremost religious leaders of the most religious nation on earth were actually nothing better than any infidel, atheist, communist, publican, heathen, cannibal, or “drunk,” on the face of the earth. Their religion, reduced to its smallest common denominator, was nothing but a desire to maintain a high standard of living for themselves.”

2. Their “god” was their belly (Phil 3:19).

C. GOD who is over all (vs. 20-22).

1. The Pharisees magnified the worth of the gold and gifts above God. The temple, altar, and heaven are more than all the gifts and gold in the world. God is above all.
2. The altar is holier than the gift on it. The Temple is holier than the altar. Heaven is holier than the Temple. And the God that made it (Acts 7:48-50) is holier than all.

3. Therefore, the Pharisees' distinction about what is RIGHT to swear by, and what is wrong, is nothing but irreverent nonsense.

II. Their **DISREGARDED virtues** (v. 23)—“...omitted the weightier matters...”

➡ Majoring the minor while ignoring the “weightier matters.”

➡ TITHING—The Pharisees were very meticulous in matters of tithing.

- Paying tithes was their duty. Christ tells them they ought not to leave it undone.
- This included agricultural produce. Leviticus 27:30—“*And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD'S: it is holy unto the LORD.*” Jesus mentioned how precise the Pharisees were in their tithing.

“*Mint*” is a spice that grows in Palestine. “*Anise*” was a kind of dill. It grew both wild and cultivated. The seeds of “*cummin*” is another seasoning spice. These were the most insignificant products of the earth. The Pharisees were meticulous to tithe of these minor items, yet neglect the most important things.

➡ All the things in God's Word are weighty, but some things are MORE WEIGHTY—more important than other things.

- Who “*the Sons of God*” were in Genesis 6 is not as important as who “*the Son of God*” is that was born in Bethlehem.
- When the church began not as important as being faithful to your local church today.
- Whether there was a “gap” between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 is not as important as whether there is a “gap” in your personal relationship with God.
- Outward form is not as important as *inward character*.
- What you do is not as important *as what you are*.
- What you believe is not as important as *in whom you have believed!*

- ➡ Jesus was not condemning tithing. He was rebuking the Pharisee for omitting *“the weightier matters of the law”*—judgment, mercy, and faith. Most of our sins are SINS OF OMISSION—leaving things undone that should be done.
- ➡ JUDGMENT, MERCY and FAITH are the weightier matters that the Lord REQUIRES. Micah 6:8—*“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do **justly** [judgment], and to love **mercy** [mercy], and to **walk humbly with thy God** [faith]?”*
- ➡ Notice the ORDER of these three weightier matters:
 - A. First, judgment (inward)—The law **EXPOSES** you as a sinner heading for judgment.
 - B. Second, mercy (outward)—God **EXTENDS** mercy to you through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross so you can show mercy to others as God has to you.
 - C. Third, faith (Godward)—You **EXERCISE** faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior.
 - It doesn’t take much faith to tithe. The Pharisees were tithing, but not doing it in faith. They were doing it for outward show. Religion without faith is a Godless religion.

SUMMATION: The parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14), is an excellent illustration of Matthew 23:23. Notice this Pharisee was a tither, but omitted *“the weightier matters”* of God’s Word:

- Omitting JUDGMENT—He failed to judge his own sin while condemning others.
- Omitting MERCY— He *“despised others.”* He failed to be merciful concerning the publican and failed to recognize his own need of mercy.
- Omitting FAITH— He was one of those who *“trusted in themselves... and prayed thus WITH HIMSELF!”*

What are you trusting? You are either trusting what the Lord Jesus Christ did for you on the cross, or you are trusting in yourself. A person, like the Pharisee was self-sufficient— He didn’t see his need of God.

That is why he was not saved. And that is why you might not be saved.