

**The Hypocrisy of the Pharisees' Priorities**  
**Matthew 23:16-24**  
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Matthew 23 records the condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus. In Matthew 23:1-7, Jesus warned the crowds who had gathered about these false leaders. In Matthew 23:8-12, Jesus exhorted His disciples to avoid the example of the scribes and Pharisees who sought to exalt themselves by their religious status.

In Matthew 23:13-36, Jesus spoke a series of seven distinct statements of condemnation to the scribes and Pharisees. These seven statements of condemnation spoken specifically to the scribes and Pharisees addressed their practices, their priorities, and their proselytism. Throughout this chapter, these religious leaders are called "hypocrites" and are specifically described as hypocritical in their conduct (cf. Matthew 23:3). Jesus reserved His most serious judgment for this group of religious leaders who were the most influential in leading the Jewish people astray.

**False distinctions in swearing (23:16-22)**

In the other six condemnations, the scribes and Pharisees were called hypocrites by Jesus. They were hypocrites because "*they say things and do not do them*" (Matthew 23:3), for they manipulated the revelation of God to serve themselves (23:4-7). In six of the seven condemnations, they are addressed "*woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites,*" but in 23:16 they are simply addressed as "*woe to you, blind guides.*"

Earlier, Jesus had called the scribes and Pharisees "*blind guides*" in Matthew 15:10-14, "*And he called the people to him and said to them, 'Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.'* Then the disciples came and said to him, '*Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?*' He answered, '*Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides.*'"

They were blind guides because they were not only unable to see that Jesus was the Messiah, they were also unable to help direct anyone else toward this truth. In this third and fourth "*woe to you,*" we see them called "*blind guides*" (23:16, 24). They are blind guides because of their false teachings that led people astray.

The woe spoken in 23:16-22 addresses their practice of making false distinctions in their vows, specifically vows made in relation to the temple. Since Jesus spoke these words at the temple, they carry an even more powerful message. Since the Jews held the temple in high regard, swearing an oath by the temple added greater weight to its seriousness, in their eyes.

This condemnation is divided between the two reasons for the pronouncement by Jesus, the two rhetorical questions posed by Jesus regarding their practices, and three concluding clarifying statements by Jesus about oath making. These together serve to expose their hypocrisy and their false teaching, which led to them being blind guides.

The first reason for their condemnation was the false distinction they made between swearing an oath by the temple versus swearing an oath by the gold of the temple. The practice of the scribes and Pharisees viewed the temple itself as less substantial to their nation than the material from which the temple was built.

There is no way to know how much gold was used in Herod's temple. When the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, the gold would have been plundered. When David prepared to build the original temple, there was a very large amount in the construction, *"Now behold, with great pains I have prepared for the house of the LORD 100,000 talents of gold and 1,000,000 talents of silver, and bronze and iron beyond weight, for they are in great quantity"* (1 Chronicles 22:14).

In the Hebrew standard of measure, a talent of gold would weigh about 75 pounds. To convert to modern value, 75 pounds of gold (using the ancient Hebrew measure of troy ounces, or twelve ounces to a pound), would be about 900 ounces. At the current price of gold in 2025 at \$4,000 per ounce, one talent of gold would be worth \$3,600,000 and 100,000 talents of gold would be worth \$360,000,000,000 or 360 billion dollars. This is only the gold in the original temple so we can see why the scribes and Pharisees greatly valued the gold of the temple.

Clearly, the scribes and Pharisees saw the earthly value of the material of the temple to be more significant than the temple itself. Jesus called the temple *"My house"* and that God *"dwells within it"* (Matthew 21:13, 23:21). But the scribes and Pharisees viewed its ornate material as more important than God's purpose for it. This happens so often with churches today. People marvel at the architecture and grandeur of cathedrals, with no interest whatsoever in actually using such places for the sake of ministry and worship of God.

The false distinction that Jesus noted between the temple and the gold of the temple demonstrated that they had viewed that the oaths taken by the temple were considered to be insignificant compared with oaths taken by the temple gold. The reason that they made this distinction was to serve their own selfish purposes. They could swear an oath by the temple without any intention of fulfilling that oath because it was not made by the gold of the temple. Therefore, it became a means of deceiving others, who could have considered their promise to be more meaningful than it actually was.

The Jews aren't the only society that sought to identify things that people might consider to be important enough to make their word more reliable. In our country, we have used the Bible to elevate the importance of testimony in the court of law. This is likewise only an external means of compelling someone toward truthfulness, when in reality, truthfulness was dependent exclusively on the character of the person giving the testimony.

This is why Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount, *"But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil"* (Matthew 5:34-37). Our words must be sincere and reliable, and we ought not to need anything to prop up our integrity. In their selfishness, Jews considered the gold of the temple to be worthy enough to make an oath sworn by it to make one obligated to his promise.

Jesus rightly condemned the foolishness of thinking that the economic value of the temple gold was more important than the spiritual value of the temple itself when He said, *"You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?"* in verse 17. Corrupt religious leaders so often consider the economic value of material things and money to be more important than what God has sanctified, namely the people who are able to provide the money for the purposes these leaders intend. God's people are more important than earthly things.

The scribes and Pharisees applied their same thinking to the offerings that were given and the altar upon which these offerings were sacrificed. They considered the value of the offering itself to be worth more than *"the altar that sanctifies the offering."* This was the same overemphasis on earthly things over God.

After Jesus gave the two reasons for their condemnation, swearing by the gold of the temple and swearing by the offering on the altar, and giving two clarifying statements of why what God had provided to sanctify the earthly thing is more important, He gave three concluding statements to correct the wrong beliefs about such swearing. The first two involved what He had already spoken to, the altar and the temple. Swearing by the altar obligated one to their oath just as much as swearing by what was upon that altar. Furthermore, swearing by the temple obligated one just as swearing by the gold of the temple because by swearing by the temple, one was truly swearing by God Himself, who dwelled within the temple.

Jesus concluded this third woe by referring to their practice of swearing by heaven and saying that when they swore by heaven, they swore *“both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.”* Just as there could be no distinction between the gold of the temple and the temple, and the altar and the offering upon the altar, there could likewise be no distinction between God’s throne and God in heaven. By making these false distinctions in order to free themselves from the obligation of their commitments, they demonstrated their foolish value system of elevating material possessions above the worship of God, and ultimately above God Himself. This is why they were blind and could not give spiritual direction to anyone.

Importantly, all oaths are binding, yet no oaths are necessary. Jesus taught that we ought to simply let our commitments stand, based upon the integrity of our words alone, *“let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil”* (Matthew 5:37). While if we are required to take an oath, such as in a court of law, we can do so, but it is needless if we are truly committed to these words of Jesus. What is evil is the practice of the scribes and Pharisees of escaping their obligation based upon a deceptive phrasing of their oath. Man continues to seek to evade his commitment based upon some technicality, and by parsing the letter of the law in order to avoid the implications of the spirit of the law, we serve to deceive others for our benefit.

### **False distinctions in Scripture (23:23-24)**

A second area when they foolishly emphasized lesser things over greater things was in the realm of the Scripture. Like with their worship of God, they gave more value in the things that were insignificant than what was truly essential. Specifically, they did this in matters of the provisions of the law. Certain matters of God’s law were *“weightier provisions”* and those parts must certainly not be neglected in obedience to God.

The tithing of “*mint and dill and cummin*” were noteworthy because they were spices used in the preparation of food. While there was no question that tithes were required of all farm produce such as grain and wine (Deuteronomy 14:22-29), there was a debate over whether this extended even to spices used to prepare such produce for consumption. The scribes and Pharisees viewed that the collection of tithes from these spices should have been included in the collection of tithing the nation. This was not just a conservative view of the requirements of the law, it resulted in greater income for the nation.

Jesus did not disagree with their view of tithing of these spices, for He said in verse 23, “*these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.*” Yet, He certainly viewed their emphasis to be disproportionately consumed with these lesser matters of the law. The practice of tithing such spices would require meticulous counting of seeds from dill and cummin plants, and leaves from mint plants. These details led them to overlook the greater issues of the Law that were less objective.

Their tithing practices led to a prideful self-righteousness, as Jesus noted in His parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, “*The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get’*” (Luke 18:11-12). This type of self-exaltation is the natural result of religious teaching that focuses on quantitative standards of holiness, for it leads people to practice their righteousness before men, so as to be noticed by them (contra Matthew 6:1-18).

Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees that they “*have neglected the weightier provisions of the law.*” By weightier, Jesus did not mean these provisions were harder or more difficult to follow, but rather these were more central and significant in the Scripture. He used the concept of weightier in light of the distinction the Pharisees made between the heavy and light commands. It was in this regard that He was asked by one of the Pharisees in Matthew 22:36, “*which is the great commandment in the Law?*”

The scribes and Pharisees had wrongly considered the tithing of spices to be some of the heavier, more important commands, and neglected those commands that were truly based upon the character of God Himself. These commands they neglected were “*justice and mercy and faithfulness.*” These weighty triplet commands stand in contrast to the three trifling triplet spices to be tithed of mint, dill and cummin.

*“Justice and mercy and faithfulness”* reflect the words of Micah 6:8, *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* The scribes and Pharisees had neglected these commandments that the Lord required of them. The prophet Micah revealed these weightier responsibilities, but these leaders paid him no attention.

Notably, the first requirement that the scribes and Pharisees neglected was justice. These words of Jesus were spoken two days before the greatest injustice in history was perpetrated by these very religious leaders. They would plot to arrest and condemn the righteous Son of God in order to protect their own power over the Jewish people. This injustice would also result in the greatest act of mercy in human history, as the Savior of the world would be faithful to lay His life down for the sin of all mankind.

The scribes and Pharisees emphasized the small details of the law while neglecting the main tenets that reflected God’s character. In other words, they majored on minor issues. Jesus addressed this in verse 24, *“You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”* It has been shown that the word gnat (QAMLA) and the word camel (GAMLA) would have sounded very similar in the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke.

The obvious contrast is regarding the small size of the gnat that was strained versus the enormous size of the camel that was swallowed. While the hyperbole of swallowing a camel was literally impossible, there are many who believe that the Jews actually strained their wine in order to not swallow a gnat. This would have been done by clenching their teeth while drinking. This was primarily because a gnat was considered unclean. Therefore, they would strain out the smallest unclean creature (Leviticus 11:41-42) and yet swallow that largest unclean creature in their land (Leviticus 11:4).

The contrast to the straining at gnats and swallowing camels stands the teaching of Jesus about the greatest commandment, which led to His discourse against the scribes and Pharisees. Loving the Lord and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is the preeminent requirement and *“he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law”* (Romans 13:8). This law of love undergrids the commands that were neglected by the religious leaders, for true love is just, merciful and faithful. When we truly love God, we will align ourselves with what is closest to God’s revealed will in importance. We cannot diminish the greatest commandment by overemphasizing anything else in the Scripture.

## **Conclusion**

The practice of the scribes and Pharisees to avoid their commitments based upon their earthly value system of the Jewish religion was another evil practice that Jesus condemned. Such a view of material value can deprecate what is of spiritual value. When we expand our emphasis on religious accouterments (whether clothing, art, buildings, etc.), we diminish the attention to the matters of our inward spiritual nature. Our faithfulness to the Lord must move us toward keeping our promises with integrity, letting our yes be yes, and our no be no. Any attempt to escape the responsibilities of our commitments is of evil (cf. Matthew 5:37).

The legalistic scribes and Pharisees are the precursors to the legalistic religious leaders of today, who highlight the relatively trivial aspects of the Christian life and underemphasize the most important matters. One common way of undermining God's will is to distract people with the minor aspects of the Scripture. The motivation for this centers around serving our own interest over the interests of others (cf. Philippians 2:4). We must keep the principle of proportionality in mind as we consider the word of God. That which is repeatedly emphasized in the New Testament cannot be overlooked.

When religious leaders give great attention to external matters of lesser importance instead of internal matters of greater importance, they lead people into confusion about God and His desires. Christianity will then be wrongly judged on matters that are not reflective of the heart of God. This is how many are led astray.

*“Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30 NIV).*