

How Do You Swallow a Camel?

Thomas Robinson, *Matthew—Conflict and Vision 1*, January 10, 2016

Matthew 23:1-24 (Cf Mk 12:38-40; Lk 11:42-52; 20:45-47)

¹ Then Jesus said to the **crowds** and to his **disciples**, ² “The **scribes** and the **Pharisees** sit on Moses’ seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they **preach**, but do not **practice**.

⁴ They tie up **heavy burdens**, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

⁵ They do all their **deeds to be seen by others**. For they make their **phylacteries** broad and their **fringes** long, ⁶ and they love the **place of honor** at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being **called rabbi** by others.

⁸ But **you are not to be called rabbi**, for you have **one teacher**, and you are all brothers.

⁹ And call no man your **father** on earth, for you have **one Father**, who is in heaven.

¹⁰ Neither be called **instructors**, for you have **one instructor**, the **Messiah**.

¹¹ The **greatest** among you shall be your **servant**. ¹² Whoever **exalts himself** will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

¹³ But **woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** For you shut the **kingdom of heaven** in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁴

¹⁵ **Woe to you**, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single **proselyte**, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of Gehenna as yourselves.

¹⁶ **Woe to you, blind guides**, who say, ‘If anyone **swears by the temple**, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the **gold** of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁷ You **foolish and blind!** For which is greater, the gold or the **temple** that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the **altar**, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the **gift** that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁹ You **blind men!** For which is greater, the **gift** or the **altar** that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So **whoever swears** by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

²³ **“Woe to you**, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you **tithe mint and dill and cumin**, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice and mercy and faithfulness**. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ **You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel.”**

Matthew 22:35-40

³⁵ And one of the Pharisees, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ [Deut. 6:4-5] ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ [Lev. 19:18] ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 20:25-28

²⁵ But Jesus ... said, “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you! But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life (psyche) as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 11:29

²⁹ "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Matthew 6:1

¹ "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness in front of others in order to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

Matthew 5:34-35

³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

Jesus' Profile in Contrast

Since coming to Jerusalem, Jesus has challenged the whole range of leaders in the Temple by actions and teaching: Chief priests (authority, God's work in John); Pharisees (taxes to Caesar); Sadducees (resurrection); serious questions (great command, Messiah/David).

Matthew begins the last of five collection of Jesus' teaching: Mt 5-7, 10, 13, 18, now 23-25.

He focuses many things said before and anticipates the future beyond Jesus' ministry.

Jesus had a sharp profile among the many teachers, viewpoints, and parties among Jews of his day: Pharisees, Sadducees/chief priests, Essenes, Zealots, individual prophets like John. Each pointed a direction for a people in waiting, after exile, subjugation, longing for a future. Many envisioned a rigorous, purified community and violent opposition to Rome (Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots in different ways). Temple leaders/Sadducees compromised with Rome.

Jesus announced God's kingdom breaking in, but not with the popular revolution many wanted. Something more, hard to see yet. Love for enemies? Tax collectors and sinners? Really?

The Pharisees offered a real challenge to Jesus in understanding God and God's will. They used oral law developed by scribes to call all Jews to rigorous purity and obedience to Torah as if priests. You show your identity as a Jew by carefully keeping the literal wording of laws.

Jesus sees the problem as fundamental. Their ideal of rigorous purity blinds them to the God who loves even sinners and Gentiles and want his promise to Abraham opened to all.

Artificial Weight and Real Weight

Jesus warns listeners about Scribes and Pharisees and then challenges both directly. In their teaching roles, listen to the scriptures but not the way they put them into practice. Jesus sees their practice as literal/surface obedience but not transformation of the heart. Jesus challenges their pattern of scripture interpretation, understanding of what God wants, not condemning every Pharisee. Their interpretation led them astray – they are blind guides.

That was serious! They were doing the opposite of what God wanted: Closing the doors of the Kingdom to others, not broadening it to bless the world. By rigorous right actions (tithing, phylacteries, exact oaths) they created artificial weight that excluded many Jews, all others. They created standards that exalted their authority, blinding them to God's lowly Messiah.

They use their authority to specify exact boundaries for oaths about the temple, but their process blinds them to the God who makes the temple holy. Tithing requirements separate them from fellowship with non-tithers and creates exclusion, not mercy and justice. They miss the heart of God to whom they tithe. The strain out the gnat and gulp down the camel.

Jesus prophetically challenges the Pharisees in order to open eyes to a different vision: a self-giving servant who humbles himself not to exclude but to welcome the broken and lost.