

# Matthew 23:23-24

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-23/matthew-2323-24/>

*In His fifth woe to the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus chastises the Pharisees for paying attention to tiny aspects of their rules even as they ignored the larger principles that God's law pointed toward.*

The parallel account of this statement is found in Luke 11:42.

The fifth *woe* in Matthew 23 regarded misplaced priorities. It was addressed *to you, the scribes and Pharisees*.

*The scribes* were religious lawyers. They meticulously searched the Law and the Tradition to create loopholes for themselves and to manufacture more and more rules to control the people. *The Pharisees* were the teachers of these religious customs and the leaders of the local synagogues. They crushed anyone who defied their authority or who failed to follow *the scribes'* rules. Together, *the scribes and Pharisees*, were an unopposable and corrupt force of religious malpractice.

Jesus called them *hypocrites*. Hypocrite comes from the Greek term for “actor.” It is someone who pretends to be one thing but is really another. It describes someone who is fake. Jesus used this term to brand *the scribes and Pharisees* as religious frauds.

The reason He called them *hypocrites* in this *woe* was because they “majored on the minors.” They made such a big deal about minute facets of their moral contests that they forgot the basic principles that the rules were supposed to support. Their Bad Religion had caused them to miss the moral forest for the trees. Or as Jesus said, “they miss the *camel* for a *gnat*.”

Jesus said *you* meticulously *tithe* everything, including the grains of your spices, such as *mint, dill, and cummin* even as you ignore *the weightier provisions of the law: justice; mercy; faithfulness*.

To *tithe* means to donate or give away a tenth.

Where did the idea of tithing come from? And why is it important?

To begin, the Bible makes clear that God owns everything. The psalmist writes, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains, The world, and those who dwell in it” (Psalm 24:1). And the Bible also sanctions the idea of ownership of property (Genesis 34:10; Acts 2:45). Landownership was the most valuable form of property in the ancient world and the Bible greatly honored it (Deuteronomy 19:14).

The Bible commands us to respect the property rights of others by not coveting or stealing from them (Exodus 20:15, 17). The Biblical idea of human possessions and ownership is one of

stewardship. Things can “belong” to us for a time. But we can’t take our possessions with us when we die. There are no U-haul trailers behind hearses. God wants us to use the things that we possess to meet our personal needs and enjoyment, and for the benefit of His kingdom (1 Timothy 6:17-19). But God lets each possessor of things decide how he will use or spend them. We will be responsible to God for our stewardship in the judgement that is to come (2 Corinthians 5:10). This is the Biblical idea of ownership/stewardship.

God grants to us the stewardship to own and possess things, and determine their use. God gives us the opportunity to squander our possessions, or to enjoy them, and use them wisely to also benefit others.

“He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.”  
(Ephesians 4:28)

The Bible’s advocacy of private property makes it possible for individuals to love and serve one another and advance the kingdom through their possessions. If there was no personal ownership or control, then there would be no authentic giving—there would only be state welfare. And if there was no personal ownership or control of property, those receiving the benefits of the coerced funds would lose the opportunity to be personally valued and loved by the person who gave. The institution of private property allows love to be part of the equation in these transactions, and makes authentic giving possible.

The Israelites were commanded to tithe every year to the Lord (Numbers 28:26). They were also directed to give an additional tithe each year that was to be consumed in Jerusalem at the festival (Deuteronomy 14:22—29). They were to offer a special tithe every third year to help those who were less fortunate in the Israelite community. This is likely a replacement for the second tithe, the tithe that was to be consumed at the festival. Accordingly, every third year, the Israelites were to set aside that which they would otherwise enjoy in worship to the Lord, and instead provide that amount for the sustenance of the poor in their community. According to Jewish tradition, this would have been years three and six of the seven year cycle, with the seventh year being the sabbath year ([See commentary on Deuteronomy 26:12-15](#)).

Throughout the Bible, God invites and commands His people to wisely give and invest portions of their property to His cause—whether this be to support the Levites (Numbers 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:17,19), to care for the widows and orphans (Deuteronomy 14:28-29), to support building projects (Exodus 35:21-22, Nehemiah 7:71-72), or family members (Deuteronomy 5:16; Matthew 15:4-6), etc. The Bible often does not put requirements on how much one should or should not give and leaves it up to the giver to determine how much to give, as God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

The act of giving a tenth or a *tithe* is a traditional amount to give. Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20). Jacob later promised God that he would give “a tenth” of his earnings if the Lord would protect him (Genesis 28:22). God notably chastised Israel for not giving their tithes and dared them to give it to see if He would not give them blessings from heaven (Malachi 3:8-10).

All that to say: one of the main reasons God assigns us ownership of things is so that we have a greater opportunity to love and materially serve other people through sharing our resources of gifts and tithes. God expects us to use the resources we own as a means to faithfully facilitate *justice and mercy* to others (Matthew 25:35-36, 40; 1 Timothy 6:17).

But *the scribes and Pharisees* gave their *tithe* not out of a love for God or as a means to help people, but as a way to win the moral games according to their Bad Religion. Their *tithe of mint and dill and cummin* were charades meant to make them look good in the eyes of men.

A measure of *dill* is made up of tiny strings, and *cummin* are tiny seeds. So the image Jesus pictures is of Pharisees counting out 1,000 tiny seeds of *cummin* out of a pile of 10,000 *cummin* seeds, and similarly counting out 1,000 tiny strands of *dill* out of a bowl of 10,000 strands of *dill*. It is likely a hyperbole intended to amplify their hypocrisy.

If offering token sacrifices of bulls and goats does not please God (Psalm 51:16), then tithing spices as a way of winning religious bragging rights does not either. *The scribes and Pharisees* were really tithing to themselves and their own self-image.

In so doing, they *neglected the weightier provisions* and main purpose, of God's commands. The main things God cares about are *justice and mercy and faithfulness* to Him (Micah 6:8). When Luke recorded Jesus as saying a similar *woe to the Pharisees*, Jesus included "love" alongside *justice* among the *weightier provisions of the law* which should not be neglected (Luke 11:42).

The biblical notion of *justice* is to line up our behavior according to God's standards. Our natural bent is to attempt to conform others to our own standards. God's ultimate standard is for us to love and obey Him, and to love others as we love ourselves. The biblical notion of *mercy* is to put ourselves in the shoes of others. This gives us a better ability to do for them what we would want done for ourselves. And the biblical notion of agape love is to choose to seek the best for others, based on biblical values of what God tells us is in our best interest.

In exercising *justice, mercy* and love, they would be exercising *faithfulness* to God's commands. In each case, Jesus expected these religious leaders to seek to elevate and benefit others. The Pharisees were doing the opposite, they were exploiting others.

Jesus challenged *the Pharisees* about the hypocrisy of their tithing gimmicks when they confronted Him about the way His disciples ate bread. He told them that they broke God's commandment to honor your Father and Mother for "the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 5:3-4) when they refused to help their aging parents and used the excuse that "whatever I have that would help you has [already] been given to God" (Matthew 15:5). Apparently winning tithing contests involving spice was more important to these religious leaders than God or their parents. This is another outcome of their Bad Religion.

Jesus chastised the Pharisees for their wicked priorities. *These are the things you should have done without neglecting the others*. The phrase *the things you should have done* appears to apply to living with *justice, and mercy and faithfulness*. That is Jesus's priority. However, Jesus also expected them to obey the Law, and tithe their goods. The *others* that Jesus did not want them to

neglect included all the rest of the elements of the Law. When we focus on the main points, we should end up doing the minor points. The Pharisees were focusing on the minor points because they desired to self-justify.

In the New Testament age God also expects us to generously give our resources to bless others and promote His kingdom. But He expects us to do these *things* in a way that does not interfere with acting justly and being merciful or ignoring the main principles of His *law* (1 Timothy 6:17; 2 Corinthians 9:7).

Jesus then repeated His label for *the scribes and Pharisees*—*You blind guides* (Matthew 23:16; 15:14) before making another hyperbolic expression—*who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel*.

The image of this comparison involves eating food. He says that when *the scribes and Pharisees* notice a tiny *gnat* in their food they *strain it out* in disgust because they don't want to eat it. But even as they see this *gnat*, they don't see the enormous camel on their plate and they *swallow it whole*. Jesus's apparent point of this hyperbole draws attention to *the scribes and Pharisees'* absurd habit of obsessing on the details while they miss the grand picture.

The *gnat* in this metaphor represents the minor details of tithing. Jesus illustrated this previously with a picture of the Pharisees sorting out tiny seeds or strands of spices to *tithe*. And the straining *out* of the *gnat* is a fitting image for counting grains of spice. The *camel* in this metaphor represents *the weightier provisions of the law: justice, mercy, faithfulness, and love*. *The Pharisees* pay attention to the *gnat* but neglect the *camel*, meaning they paid attention to minor rules that made little difference to others, while neglecting the primary ways they were supposed to act toward and bless others.

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>23</sup> **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.”** <sup>24</sup> **You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!**