GNATS
Matthew 23:23-24

“Most of our lives are overgrown with the unimportant.”

The Scripture we’re looking at today as we reflect on last year—the old year—and look toward 2003—the new year—was addressed to the Pharisees. And it was addressed to them in a humorous way.

Most of us don’t associate humor with Christ. Yet He used it on several occasions to make a point. In the passage before us we see Jesus’ biting or sarcastic humor in reference to the religious leaders of His day.

A boy falling on the ice would not be humorous, but a proud man dressed to the hilt with his nose in the air falling on the ice would be humorous. Why? Because pride and falling don’t go together. They simply don’t fit. Things that naturally don’t go together bring a smile to us.

If you ever questioned whether God has a sense of humor, just think of camels (animals put together by a committee), monkeys, penguins and middle-aged men. But there is nothing funny about a deer, a lion or a tiger. Why? Because they are put together right and that is why we consider them to be so beautiful.

People who wear clothes that do not go together often will invite a smile, snicker or laughter. The circus and the golf course are cases in point.

Jesus uses a vivid illustration of what does not go together—the lost sense of proportion—to drive home a very important message. In order to avoid the risk of drinking anything unclean wine was strained so that any possible impurity might be strained out of it. Jesus gives the picture of a very proud and devoted religious man who took himself too seriously carefully straining his wine to avoid swallowing a microscopic insect, and yet cheerfully swallowing a camel. It is the picture of a man who has completely lost his sense of proportion.

MAGNIFY NONESSENTIALS

Gnats. Animals we hardly, if ever, think about. Yet Jesus used these animals to drive home a very important message. You can swallow a hundred gnats and I doubt whether your health would be affected at all. They don’t contain many calories. Unlike mosquitoes, they are not known to be carriers of any kind of disease. I don’t think they would harm you at all. Yet, people strain them out and they swallow a camel. That is exactly what happens when people are frustrated in their walk with God. It happens in the whole realm of religion, when people magnify nonessentials and become very careful about them, yet they bypass the major things that could really cause them trouble.
The previous verse shows how the Pharisees were guilty of straining out gnats and swallowing camels. It was universally accepted that tithes of the main crops must be given. Every person must lay aside one-tenth of his produce for God. But mint and dill and cummin are herbs of the kitchen garden, and would not be grown in any quantity. A person would have only a little patch of them in his garden; all three were used in cooking, and dill and cummin had medicinal uses. To tithe them would be to tithe an infinitesimally small crop, maybe not much more than the produce of one plant. Only those who were overly meticulous would tithe the single plants of the kitchen garden. That is precisely what the Pharisees were like. They were so absolutely meticulous about tithes that they would tithe even one clump of mint; and yet these same men might be guilty of injustice; they were hard and arrogant and cruel, and forgot the claims of mercy; they would take oaths and pledges and promises with the deliberate intention of evading them, and so forget fidelity. In other words, they kept the trifles of the Law, and forgot the things that really matter.

This same spirit is with us in our churches as long as Christ does not rule in our hearts. There are many people who hear wear the appropriate clothes to church, carefully hand in their offering, adopt the right attitude in prayer, are never absent from the celebration of Holy Communion, and who do not do an honest day’s work, and who are irritable and bad-tempered and mean with their money. There is nothing easier than to observe all the outward actions of religion and yet be completely unspiritual.

A SENSE OF PROPORTION

There is nothing more necessary than a sense of proportion in order to save us from confusing religious observance with real devotion.

How many there are of us who are guilty of the same thing of what these Pharisees were guilty! We spend our days frustrated and upset over little things. We never get around to doing anything about the big things because we’ve dissipated all our energy and our time on nonessentials. We human beings seem to want it that way. At election time people spend more time arguing over some minor statement that a candidate made in a speech, than they do in being concerned over the fact that all the candidates are completely ignoring the major issues facing our country.

Preoccupation with Trivialities

It is the tendency of religion to magnify gnats until all we see are gnats. This preoccupation with trivialities is keeping people out of the kingdom of God. That is the reason the Pharisees missed it completely. The Lord told them, “Listen, the harlots and the publicans will go into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” Does that mean a harlot is morally superior to a Pharisee? Of course not! It just means that the Pharisee is so busy dealing with gnats that he
never has the time nor the inclination of heart to deal with major moral and spiritual issues, whereas a harlot and a publican are deep enough in sin that they can see the issue; they can see what they need from God and they can look to God for the answer.

People are found to be very scrupulous about points of politeness, and very negligent of real kindness. They will not offend an acquaintance with a harsh phrase, and yet they will ruin him if they can outwit him in a business transaction. There are people of strict Puritanism, who forbid even innocent forms of amusements for their children, and yet who are self-indulgent, ill-tempered, uncharitable and covetous. Such people swallow a huge camel, while straining the gnats of their children’s cup of pleasure.

We strain out the gnat and swallow the camel when we are scrupulous about trifling errors and unscrupulous about great evils. The Pharisees swallowed the camel when they gave Judas the price of innocent blood; they strained out the gnat when they put money in the treasury (Mt. 26:6). Things should be taken in God’s order, which is the order of their important.

There is nothing wrong with being scrupulous. For Jesus said, “These things ought you to have done.” Virtue is to be displayed in the smallest matters. The morality that neglects detail is imperfect.

WHAT IS MOST?

There has to be one thing ever before us. And that is the attitude that always asks:

Show us what is not important. Show us what is important. And show us what is most important.

Life does not consist of a religion in which certain things are condemned, and when you have stopped doing them you are a good Christian. I know of many Christians who would answer when asked the question of whether they know what they believe with what they don’t believe or practice.

God is concerned with our relationship with Him; not in the things we don’t do.

We must put the most important things first. We must be careful so we don’t strain out gnats and swallow camels.

What do we talk about at home? What do we argue about? What disturbs us? It is surprising to see how dedicated people can be so disturbed over little things. They belong to the kingdom of gnats; that’s all they see.
What are camels and what are gnats? What are the essentials?

- **Salvation**—Eternal Life
- **Sanctification**—A Lifestyle of Discipleship
  - **Godliness** that results in *character development*: *justice, mercy and faithfulness* (Mt 23:23). (the Beatitudes & the Fruit of the Spirit)
  - **Worship** that is *deep*
  - **Fellowship** that is *intimate*
  - **Witness** that is *vibrant*
  - **Service** that is *selfless* and *sacrificial*
- Household of Faith—The Family of Believers
  
  “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us **do good** to **all people,** especially to those who belong to **the family of believers**”—Gal 5:19).

- Unchurched—”All people” (Gal 5:19).
- The Poor –The Needy (mentioned 250 times in the Bible)

  “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: **to look after orphans and widows** in their distress and **to keep oneself from being polluted** by the world” (Jas 1:27).

**GOD’S STEWARDS**

The Bible makes it clear that we are **God’s stewards**. And being a steward involves managing someone else’s property. The Christian is a steward of both his life and his possessions since both belong to God. As those who are accountable to God, Christians should become responsible stewards of their time, talents, gifts and money.
Priorities

Our stewardship or lack of it reveals our **priorities**. They show whether we are swallowing camels or straining out gnats. Is the Lord first in our planning? Is He the one who decides how we spend our resources: time, talents, gifts and money? Are we satisfied with the good when we should be doing the best?

**Wise Use of Resources**

We have all been entrusted with 168 hours each week. Are we investing our week or are we spending it? Spending is final while an investment produces a return. God is interested in the way in which we use the time He has given us. The way we use our time is indicative of our real priorities.

How to make wise use of our resources:

1. **Prayerful Planning**—*List things* to be done in order of priority. Good things in life can crowd out the best things.

2. **Obedient Selection**—*Do the most important tasks first* and in faith commit unfinished ones to the Lord. Many things that initially appear urgent are not.

3. **Concentration and Diligence**—Do the task you select *wholeheartedly*. Do one thing at a time and stay with it until it is finished.

Our gifts must be used for God’s glory. They do not belong to us for us to display them for selfish gratification; they are given for the service of others.

How we handle resources is a good indication of how much we love the Lord and how much we love others.

God help us from taking great care of the correct observance of ritual while neglecting a true spirit of devotion. God deliver us from a rigid standard of orthodoxy while neglecting a vibrant and living faith. God free us from a rote observance of church sacraments while disregarding the will of God and the obligations of obedience. God help us from a preoccupation with rules and regulations while neglecting our relationship with Him.

God deliver us from the religious pursuit of gnats!

Let us make sure our lives are not overgrown with the unimportant.
A PRAYER OF GOD’S PEOPLE

Lord, give us a true sense of proportion.

Help us from getting caught in the religious pursuit of gnats.

Deliver us, O Lord, from magnifying nonessentials.

Keep us from being preoccupied with trivialities.

Help us not to strain out gnats and swallow a camel.

Help us not to spend our days frustrated and upset over little things and thereby miss doing what we should about big things.

Help us, Lord, to put the most important things first—first things first.

Help us to see things clearly.

Help us to use our time, talents, gifts, money wisely.

Lord, help us not to confuse religious observance with real devotion

a rigid standard of orthodoxy with a vibrant and living faith,

a punctual and rote performance of church sacraments with the will of God and the obligations of obedience.

Unison: Lord, show us what is not important; show us what is most important. In the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.