

40-23-02.wpd —The Fourth Woe

legalism, worship, essentials, superficiality, scruples

Matt 23:23-24

Superficial worship advertizes a false conception of God.

**READ Matthew 23:23-24**, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

### INTRODUCTION:

–As you can see in our **text** for "The Fourth Woe," Jesus is still using strong language, still maintaining His stance as a prophet, still trying to get people not to practice the ways of the hypocritical "teachers of the law" and legalistic "Pharisees." In this "woe" He singles out a specific facet of shallowness in their worship of God: being scrupulous with trivial matters while disregarding what God had called important. As leaders, they set forth superficial ceremonial issues as the pattern for serving God, while setting aside essential moral principles which really matter. --**HOM.idea.** This is a **major error**. It not only misrepresents God, but it leads others into this superficial kind of worship. Jesus illustrates this by telling "the crowd and his disciples" that these leaders were...

### **I. Consuming Condiments, but Missing the Meal**

- A. Legalism can blind us by adding so much to the practice of God's commands that the principle behind them is lost— Deut 14:22&23b, Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year.... so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.
1. The tithe was meant to remind people of Who their Provider was. It was a ceremonial form, but it had a relational purpose.
  2. **Our chosen forms and styles of worship must not distract us from our relationship with the One we worship.**
- B. The Jewish leaders knew that their practice of tithing herbs was a manmade rule [Jewish Talmud said that "the tithing of corn is from the Law; the tithing of herbs is from the rabbis"]
1. Their thinking was: "Hey, let's get technical. We should tithe everything. What will people think if we skip the potted spices growing on the patio?" (But the technical can easily become the mechanical and lose its

vitality and its relational purpose.)

2. Why are we tithing in the first place? "Because God wants a 10<sup>th</sup> of everything." Wrong! God wants you to remember Him!
- C. Superficial religious forms in worship can bring a false sense of security and yet leave a person feeling spiritually empty [condiments will give your taste buds an experience, but leave your stomach empty; humans are to feed on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, not of rabbis, nor from the mouths of your favorite preachers.]

**TRANS:** God allows diversity in human customs of worship. Jesus did not condemn the rabbinical practice of tithing condiments, even though it was manmade and trivial in comparison to God's major principles. His "woe" to the Jewish leaders was because they were misrepresenting God and distracting people from God's diet for humanity. They were...

### **II. Overlooking God's Menu for Holy Living**

- A. These leaders knew what was on the menu. Jesus calls them to account about "the law" in which they claimed to be experts, just as the prophets did to the people and rulers and religious leaders in their day— Hosea 12:6 (NKJV), So you, by the help of your God, return; Observe mercy and justice, And wait on your God continually. / Micah 6:8, He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.
- B. Worship becomes superficial when it is disconnected from the essential qualities of true holiness— Amos 5:21-24, "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. **But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!**"

**TRANS:** There are 3 main courses on God's menu: "justice, mercy and faithfulness," duties that go back to the beginning where God made us in His image to be and act like Him; governing the world as He would, with justice; taking care of creation, including each other, as He would, with mercy; walking in faithfulness to their Creator, instead of letting a demonic angel open their eyes to their own view of morality. [The very first scruple invented by humans after their independence from God was covering a tenth of their bodies with fig-leaf girdles, trusting it would hide their sin.] But

moral purity can no more come from wearing fig leaves than it can from tithing the leaves of "*mint, dill and cummin*." Jesus was confronting this religious attitude because it was....

### III. Promoting a Misconception of Moral Purity

- A. "*You blind guides!*" Jesus said, "*You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*"
1. [Gnats were unclean, so Jews customarily poured their wine through a cloth to strain them out, but a camel was also unclean and immensely larger]
  2. By this graphic comparison, Jesus took these scrupulous efforts of the Pharisees to avoid *insignificant ceremonial impurity* and contrasted it with their sin of much greater moral impurity by the omitting "*justice, mercy and faithfulness.*"
- B. This attitude in the Jewish leaders is exemplified the story of Judas in Mat 27:3-6. When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." [The Jewish leaders *swallowed a camel* when they paid Judas to betray an innocent man; but they scrupled when they hesitated to put the money Judas refunded back in the temple treasury.]
- C. Do we trust in certain scruples in worship to please God but **fail** to *treat others fairly*, **fail** to *be kind in word and deed*, **fail** to *be loyal to our Maker* in the public arena where He is maligned.?

### CONCLUSION:

–Superficial worship advertizes a false conception of God. God wants us to represent Him in how we worship, but legalistic worship is *mechanical*, not *relational*. It represents manmade ideas and manmade scruples. It portrays God as a meticulous scruple-checker, instead of as the Almighty Creator, a God of *justice, mercy and faithfulness*.

–Jesus said "woe" to this kind of legalism. He confronted it, because He wants to heal it. He can change *a life cramped with pettiness* into one where "*righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" manifest His Kingdom reign in our hearts. Then we can truly show the world the kind of God we have, seen in what such a God requires: *to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God*.

Matthew 23:23-24 (NIV)

23“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.