

Lesson 2: Jesus Valued Character

Memory Verse:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like white-washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.” (Matthew 23:27)

Just days before he would die, Jesus took some time to warn people about the preachers and church leaders of his day. He was not comfortable criticizing others, but the people needed to hear the warning that these men would not lead them to God. So, with tears in his voice, Jesus told the truth. He called them blind guides and accused them of being very picky about little things while ignoring important ones.

In our memory verse Jesus pointed out that they kept the parts people could see clean so they would look good, but they had forgotten about the inside, where the real filth remained undisturbed. And Jesus gave an example to help us know what he meant.

“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. (Matthew 23:23, 24)

The Jews were expected to give a tenth of all their “increase.” These leaders were observing that rule meticulously, right down to the smallest crops they harvested. But they didn't understand what God wanted from them when it came to setting things right (justice), dealing gently with sinners (mercy), or doing the right things regardless of the consequences to themselves (faithfulness).

Jesus said these things, which you won't find explicitly in the ten commandments, were more important than keeping rules meticulously. Notice that it wasn't wrong for them to give a tenth of absolutely everything, just that they needed to do the more important things as well.

To wrap up this section of his speech Jesus used a powerful metaphor. He pictured a man carefully straining his soup lest he eat a gnat. But as unlikely as it is in real life, the unclean camel slips down his throat so slickly he doesn't even notice. That's how ridiculous sin is. It tricks us into doing things that harm us while thinking we're being good people having a good time.

The same topic came up earlier when the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of not ceremonially washing their hands before they ate. Jesus pointed out that the washing was a tradition, and he gave an example of a tradition they used to break the fifth commandment. After sternly rebuking the tradition, Jesus spoke to the crowd:

“Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.’” (Matthew 15:10, 11)

The disciples still didn't understand, so Jesus made it even plainer:

“Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. “Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart [character], and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what

make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'”
(Matthew 15:16-20)

The Jews took the dietary rules God had given them very seriously. Jesus didn't deny that those rules were important, he said the content of the character was MORE important. The sinful things people do are a sign that their hearts need to be cleaned out. You can get some people to stop doing the sinful things, but if the heart [character] isn't cleaned out AND filled with good things you haven't helped them at all.

How can someone clean out their character?

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:7)

We will have much more to say about the meaning of this important text in future lessons.

Another time the Jews accused Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Jesus had a lot to say in his defense. He closed his speech with these words:

“For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:34-37)

Jesus isn't instructing people to be careful what they say. He's telling them that the words that come from their mouths reveal what is in their character. Notice that it isn't the carefully chosen words that will acquit or condemn us, it is the careless words that slip out when our guard is down. Why? Because these words reveal the content of the character.

Many religious and sincere people have been trapped into keeping rules as a way to cleanse themselves of sin. The New Testament has text after text warning against trying to make ourselves good by keeping rules. But it doesn't say this to set a lower standard than the people who focus on rules. It says this to set a standard so high that it can never be reached no matter how many rules you make up.

The only way to reach God's standard is to let Jesus cleanse our hearts, our characters, from sin. We are so infected with sin, so confused about what is right and wrong, that only Jesus can fix us. Only Jesus became a human and lived a sinless life. Only Jesus has a perfect human character. So only Jesus can fix the problems sin has caused for us.

Possible Thought Papers:

1. Read what Jesus said about food in Mark 7:14-23. Discuss the differences between that account and the one we included from Matthew.
2. Recall a time you were hurt by someone else's words. What did their words reveal about their character?
3. Think of a different metaphor you might use today to replace the gnat and camel one.