

Do You Have a Camel in Your Throat?

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Let me give you a scenario. Imagine that you're a father who is concerned for your children's safety. "You are not allowed to cross the street in front of our house," you tell them.



So far, so good. But now imagine that while you're away from home, your children see the old neighbor lady trip and fall on the pavement across the street. What would you want them to do? You have also tried to instill in them love and compassion, the willingness to help those in need. Which aspect of your will should they obey: the command to stay on their side of the street or the command to help those in need?

It seems that some of the rules you make for your children are more important than others. You would expect your children to recognize that the principle of love and compassion should trump the rule about crossing the street.

Many Christians do not realize that God our father acts just like this. He gives us rules of sorts, explaining the things that he desires, and then expect us to discern which of them are more important than others.

Let's examine an Old Testament example. God had commanded the priests in the temple to perform their ritual duties seven days per week. Easy, right? Not so much. Don't forget about the command that God's people should do no work on the Sabbath.¹ Which rule should they follow? This was a real dilemma, actually, and one that Jesus dealt with. When the Pharisees accused him and his disciples of breaking the Sabbath, he said, "Have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?" (Matthew 12:5).

Is it really possible that someone could break the Sabbath and be innocent? Jesus seems to think so. But *how* is it possible? Jesus directs us to a principle about the hierarchy of God's expectations. "If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7).

God cares about some things that he commands more than others. In this case, he cares about mercy, or faithfulness, more than the rituals he expects for worship.

¹ We can at least deal with this as an OT example. I'll make no comment on whether or not keeping the Sabbath is necessary as Christians.

Somehow, for Jesus, this permitted the priests to override the rule about the Sabbath in order to be faithful in their calling.

The Pharisees' problem was that they could not grasp this principle. They would get so caught up in the less important things that they would miss the ones that God is the most interested in. Jesus hammered them for this in Matthew 23:23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin [*all the little stuff*], and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness [*I told you that some things are more important—weightier*]. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." It's good to do all the little stuff, Jesus is saying, but don't do it with such myopic vision that you completely forget about the big stuff. "You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel."

Could it be that you are following God the same way the Pharisees did? I fear that many Christians befriend this same ghost, though he is wearing new clothing. We take the things that are good for the Christian life, some of which God even requires of us, and give them unhealthy focus. Think of tithing, for example. Many Christians have the idea that they *must* give a certain amount to the church every month. But what happens if someone else (perhaps even someone in the church) truly needs the money more? I think Jesus would have you follow the principles of justice, mercy, and faithfulness, rather than the "rules" about giving to the church.

There are many other situations we could consider. What happens when your fasting prevents you from helping others? How about your "quiet time"? Work, frugality, discipline of children, and many more good things can become too important to you and crowd out the things that God is really after. After all, these little things are only in place in order to lead to the bigger things.

You see, God is not just a rule-giver, a programmer, and we are not just automatons. Both He and we are living persons. Like any father, God expects us to distinguish between the greatest commands he gives us—things like the principles of justice, mercy, and faithfulness—and the "rules" that merely help us get closer to those principles most of the time. It's worth some life-examination, so that we will not obey God in a way that displeases him or condemn those who are guiltless.

Otherwise, you might end up with a bunch of gnats in your trash can and a bunch of camels in your throat.

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