

Reading: Matthew 23:16-28

*“You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel” (Mt 23:24)*

Jesus used this proverb in His last sermon while rebuking the hypocritical religion of His day which emphasized the externals and evaded the essentials. Gnats were perhaps smallest among flies. The camel was the largest land animal in Palestine and ritually unclean.

Jesus is seen terribly angry in the entire 23rd chapter of Matthew. He pronounces “woe” at least eight times. He addressed the religious leaders as “hypocrites, blind guides and fools.” Today’s Christianity is not much different from the Jewish religion of Christ’s day. We can only follow what our leaders preach and not what they practise (Mt 23:3). The leaders are hard on people but soft on themselves (v 4). They wear special dresses for recognition (v 5). They are after titles and positions (vv 6-12). When the leaders stop growing in the things of God, they would block the growth of the people also (v 13). Preachers rob widows and the suffering using their prayers (v 14). Pastors are more anxious about the numerical growth of their congregations than the spiritual health of the members (v 15). Rituals and traditions are more important than realities and truth (vv 16-22). Pastors will be displeased with believers who don’t pay tithes, but they will not motivate them for social work and charity (v 23). And so on.

If Jesus were here to preach in our Churches, I imagine He would say something like this: “Woe to you hypocrites! You think that flash photography and video-shooting inside the Church building will desecrate it, but seek police protection for your committee meetings! ... Woe to you hypocrites! You preach against wearing of jewels, but hoard money in banks for three generations!...”

The “touch-not...taste-not...handle-not” religion is alien to New Testament Christianity (Col 2:21). Eventhough the Israelites had come out of Egypt, Egypt had not come out of them. So it is with us. Christ has delivered us from the Law and brought us into His glorious liberty through His death (Gal 5:1). But we are still embracing legalism and living the Old Testament life in the New Testament era. Legalism blinds us so much that we cannot see even a big animal like camel! We would be living in self-deception that we are so strict even about a matter so small as a gnat!

*More purity give me, more strength to o’ercome;  
More freedom from earth-stains, more longings for Home;  
More fit for the Kingdom, more used would I be,  
More blessed and holy, more, Saviour, like Thee!*

*(Philip P. Bliss, 1838-1876, an associate of D.L. Moody)*

Almighty God, we worship You as the One who knows everything about everyone everywhere. You know our thoughts even before we express them thro' our lips. You know our intentions which are deeper than our thoughts. Nothing is hidden from You, O Lord. Thank You for the security we have because of this knowledge. Thank You that this knowledge warns us and protects us from hypocrisy. It's all for our good, O Lord!

Dear Lord, forgive us for our divided heart. We are not wholehearted in our devotion for You. Our life is not clearly divided between light and darkness. There are simply too many gray areas. Our walk and talk do not agree. The convictions in our heart and the confessions of our mouth contradict. Sorry, Lord, we are living in self-deception. Oh the day You would bring our secrets to light before Your Judgment Seat! Grant us a genuine repentance.

Father God, remove from us all satisfaction in spiritual life that leads to stagnation. Let us strive for more holiness and more purity. Grant us more purpose in prayer and more faith in Your Word. Endue us with more patience in suffering and more meekness in trial. Bless us with more joy in Your service and more gratitude for You. Make us more like Your Son. Let us go from holiness to holiness. Motivate us by Your Spirit to keep climbing higher and higher and never come down. Move us from foundation to perfection. We thank You, Lord, as we know, that's Your exact purpose.

Forgive us, O God, for the nominalism and ritualism that prevail in our Churches. Easy-believism has replaced brokenness and contriteness. Outward show has damaged inner piety. We spend too much time in discussions and hardly wait before you for Your direction. We revere our constitution more than what's written in Your Word. We champion in fund-raising techniques than trusting in Your miracle provision. Our pulpits are dry. Our altars are dry. Our hearts are dry. Our eyes are dry. Send us, O Lord, the latter rain lest we die of spiritual starvation. Revive us, O Lord, according to Your Word!

Father God, raise for us Apostles who would stir us up to action with clear vision. We need Prophets who would diagnose our disease and serve us insightful warning. We look for Evangelists who would train all the Church members for evangelism. Our Pastors must receive a fresh anointing to feed us with rich food from Your Word. Give us Teachers who would enlighten our minds to properly understand the Scriptures and dig out treasures from it. We plead for such leaders to prepare us for that Day! Amen!

*(Psa 119:25,107,154; 139:1-7; Mt 22:37,38; 23:23; 1 Jn 2:9-11; Rom 2:16;  
2 Cor 3:17,18; Heb 6:1-3; Zech 10:1; Phil 2:15,16; Eph 4:11-13)*