

Swallowing A Camel!

Two days before Jesus Christ was crucified, Jesus had His final confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees in the temple.

Matthew 23:24 [New King James] *“Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”*

What does it mean to “swallow a camel”? And could it happen to us?

A gnat, which is a little flying insect that appears when you least expect it, in food at a picnic or in a garden barbecue, might fly right into your mouth as you try to take a bite of burger.

People know that when this happens you grab a tissue and try to cough the little animal out of your mouth.

On the other hand, a camel is a big smelly animal, it would be a major problem if a person tried to swallow a camel!

Of course Jesus Christ was using a wild example to make a point that would be remembered by all who heard Him.

Matthew 23:23 [New King James] *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.”*

Jesus Christ was telling the Pharisees that they were overly concerned with small matters, while ignoring what was really important.

The Pharisees defined righteousness by a set of rules which governed outward behaviour.

This way of life caused the Pharisees to be judgemental towards other people who did not comply with these rules.

At the same time, the Pharisees overlooked the more important spiritual qualities of justice, mercy and faith.

The odd thing about “swallowing a camel” is that those who do this are not aware of what they are doing.

When we “swallow a camel” there is no sign or feeling of discomfort at all, in fact we feel good about ourselves.

The Pharisees considered that God loved them more than other people because they were paying such strict attention to strict rules.

It might be good for all of us to ask if, when we compare our life with others, do we get this good feeling, the self-satisfied, superior feeling of confidence that we are better than others based on the rules we keep that we feel make us righteous before God!

The meticulous rules of righteousness –

The Pharisees that Jesus Christ said were “swallowing camels” were righteous.

They prided themselves on their righteousness.

In their minds they were trying to do what they thought was the right thing.

They really were trying to please the Creator God, by doing all the things that they believed God appreciated.

They tithed meticulously, even on the little herbs in their garden.

The Pharisees, with the help of the scribes, had developed dozens of rules to govern what was permitted or not permitted on the Sabbath day.

Their intent was to stay so far away from breaking the Sabbath that there would be no danger of them accidentally doing work on the Sabbath, [Exodus 20:8-11]. There were 39 kinds of work prohibited on the Sabbath, many of which may seem rather silly, but the intent was very serious.

The rabbis taught that the captivity had come upon the nation on account of breaking the Sabbath, so the Pharisees were determined to prevent anyone from breaking the Sabbath and bringing another calamity on the nation.

The Pharisees were perhaps the strictest sect of Jews in observing their regulations. Maybe Jesus Christ would not have criticised them so much if they simply chose to obey such rigid guidelines themselves, especially if their hearts were right and they were really striving to please God, [Matthew 23:13-14; Mark 12:38-39].

What Jesus Christ really criticised in the Pharisees was that they continually judged everyone else by these standards they imagined were necessary for righteousness.

Luke 13:10-16 [New King James] *“Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up. But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him and said to her, ‘Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity.’ And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day.’ The Lord then answered him and said, ‘Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound, think of it, for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?’”*

Here we see how the Pharisees put their own made rigid laws concerning Sabbath keeping first before showing love and compassion towards this woman who was afflicted and tormented by an evil spirit.

This was an example of “*straining out a gnat*” being very particular about the strict observance of the law, or what the Pharisees reasoned was the letter of the law, while ignoring the real intent and purpose of the law, the spirit of the law, love for our neighbour.

The Sabbath was intended by God to be a delightful gift. Thus, doing something to relieve their suffering, physically and mentally, was in keeping with the spirit of the Sabbath.

Modern-day camel swallows –

There are still people who judge one another over similar issues in the Christian Church fellowship.

When people judge others on how they act on the Sabbath day or conduct their day-to-day life by their own standards, they are “*straining out a gnat*” and “*swallowing a camel*” by being judgemental, ignoring the Words of their Saviour Jesus Christ.

Matthew 7:1-5 [New King James] *“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your*

own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

This was one of the weightier matters that the Pharisees ignored, and we can so easily do the same ourselves.

Such judgements are **not** just because **only** God knows the full reasons and motives for a person's actions, [Psalms 139:1-16].

What we should do is judge our own actions using God's Word, the Christian Bible, as the only standard of our thoughts and conduct, [1 Corinthians 11:27-32].

The oddest thing about "*swallowing a camel*," people do **not** know what they have done, blinded by their own self-righteousness.

When we have our mouths open accusing others, we are inviting a camel in!

When we do this judging of others it makes us feel good about ourselves.

We have that satisfying feeling like after a good meal.

This is **not** being filled with the Holy Spirit but the "*camel*" of hypocrisy.

Protection against "*camels*" comes from having the same attitude of mind as King David.

Psalms 19:12-14 [New King James] "*Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults. Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.*"

Such a person is humble not judgemental, kind rather than demanding, gentle instead of rigid, open to correction rather than opinionated, Christ centred rather than self-centred. In other words, a Christian.

Such a person is **not** going to "*swallow a camel*."