

“GNATS AND CAMELS”

by John Vannorsdall

delivered by the Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

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Matthew 23:1-7, 23-26

We can usually handle small sins; the occasional anger, saying “damn,” getting drunk, a little gluttony here and there, a touch of envy, a bit of jealousy. These sins can cause grief, a lot of grief, but we can make good or absorb them. A kiss on the cheek, a smile, a handshake, and time; each is a household remedy for minor irritations. Not according to doctrine or in the sight of God or as theologians see it, but in the ordinary experience of ordinary people, small sins are an everyday occurrence which we’ve found ways of putting straight or putting behind us.

It’s the other sins, the ones written large and corporate, the sins which neither smile nor handshake can touch, which deserve our major attention. The sins which time won’t make go away, the camels we swallow while straining out gnats, there are the sins written in large type which are, nevertheless, hard for all but the prophets to read.

Ultimately, sin comes to its root in idolatry. Idolatry means that we have chosen one value or priority over another. It is a word which, in religious language, means to act in response to a value which we place above the will of God. Sometimes we make a conscious choice to respond to an alternate value and sometimes, as Saint Paul wrote, we seem to be drawn into such choices by forces beyond our control.

The gnats are everywhere. Policemen don’t like to take drunks to the hospital because they might get sick in the patrol car, just as others of us reject hitchhikers in wet swimsuits. Our convenience dominates. And the more fastidious we are in our religious commitments, the more we strain out these gnats and worry about our idolatry – placing a higher priority on the condition of our vehicle than on our commitment to acts of duty or kindness.

Students with a commitment to God face these gnats every day. Survival in a demanding academic climate competes with the commitment to spend time with a lonely or troubled peer on the floor below. Two priorities fight it out within us: a good academic record and Christ’s command to love our neighbors. People of all ages wrestle with the command of God in Christ not to lust, knowing full well the feelings of lust which rise in spite of our good intentions. The more serious we are about our desire to be faithful to God, the more troubled we are about the ordinary sins, the reversal of values, which occur within us day after day.

For the most part, though, this is small stuff compared with those idolatries we practice as a part of society, the reversals of values over which we seem to have so little control. We berate ourselves because we don’t pick up a hitchhiker in a wet bathing suit but ignore our participation in a world economy in which five hundred million people are undernourished or starving. The total amount of food produced has increased, but so has the number of people in the world, and the distribution of food is as unequal as ever. It is not that all the world’s people cannot be adequately fed. They can be fed. We choose not to do that. Why? Because one part of the world’s people has the resources to eat beef, and we have developed such a taste for it and for a

host of other foods that we have neither the will nor the desire to change our eating habits in order to prevent malnutrition which robs other human beings of their potential and condemns millions to death.

Why don't the various governments do something about this? In plain language, it is because they are voting what they know to be our desires. Their estimate is that we would prefer to live as we do, even if that means that there is not enough food to go around the world's table. That's sin written large.

Of course, church people are raising millions of dollars each year to feed the hungry. Increasingly, this aid has been in terms of specialists, equipment, and seed rather than sacks of grain – and that makes sense. It's obviously not a sin to give money to help the starving; it's benevolent, but probably a mistake. Nor is it stupid for the churches to raise money for this purpose because church leaders know that the people of the congregations would like to help. But it's probably a mistake because even a billion dollars a year would make only a beginning in solving the problem of world hunger. The money would be more effectively spent in educating ourselves to understand the high cost to others of our eating as we do and to appreciate what is happening to the soil and water supply as we attempt to get more and more from the limited arable land. The money would be more effectively spent in efforts to change our nation's priorities so that they reflect a long-term management of earth rather than short-term exploitation. The money would be more effectively spent in attempting to develop new international structures more likely to result in an equitable distribution of basic food supplies.

Most Christians know that our food consumption in the face of world hunger is offensive to God. We hesitate to own it as our sin because it seems removed from us and beyond our capacity to correct. World hunger is an institutionalized sin, and that makes it appear less personal, less like our own sin. But in a free society we cannot escape that easily. Our institutions are difficult to change, but they are subject to concerted effort by organized minorities which have a point of view and the will to pursue that view openly and intelligently. Our sin is compounded by our silence, or by the fact that we have allowed our church leaders and legislators to believe that we are content to give a few dollars a year to ameliorate the worst situations but have no desire for major changes.

What we have said is that our own well-filled table has a higher priority than the hungry people who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. That's idolatry. Christ didn't die on the cross because we use foul language. He died because we create institutions to do our sinning for us and will not put down our forks to change that.

We have known since 1974, and many knew before that time, that all the world's efficiently retrievable oil would be gone in the lifetime of most of us. Whether we found the remaining oil sooner or later made no difference in any essential way. There is a limited supply and it cannot be replaced. It was three years until former President Carter declared the moral equivalent of war against the problem, and then he asked so little of us that it was difficult for people to believe that the problem was really serious.

We have no stomach for cutting down or cutting back. By 1981, it became clear that we would risk war to preserve our claim on Middle Eastern oil. Registration for the draft was reinstated,

and the new president cut billions of dollars from services to human beings and added it to the military budget. Mothballed ships were to be reactivated, new missile systems installed, and more advanced bombers were to be built. We would solve our energy problem without serious disruption of our consumptive life. Safety standards for nuclear power plants were relaxed, and more plants were to be built before we had solved the problem of nuclear waste disposal. More coal was to be burned, and regulations concerning air pollution were to be relaxed. In Boston, the weatherman began to announce not just how much it had rained but also the amount of acid in the rain and, consequently, in the streams, lakes, and soil.

Voices of protest have been heard, often within the churches. But the largest and most active of the churches concentrated on gnats, on the effort to make all abortions illegal, while the military buildup continued and the majority of the American people assumed that they could go on consuming the remaining supplies of oil simply because they had always lived that way and still had the money to buy it or, if need be, the muscle to fight for it. This is sin written large.

One of the most effective ways to force us to cut down our use of energy has been to hit us where we live: in the pocketbook. Institutions installed valves and computers to work the valves, and householders installed storm windows not to save oil for children and grandchildren or to make more oil available to developing nations, but because the cost of oil provoked efficiency. What this means, of course, is that those with the most money to invest in changing equipment save the most money. It also means that when gasoline becomes two dollars a gallon, some of us will still be able to drive our cars and vote against mass transportation when the poor have long since had to sell their cars and wonder how they are going to get to work on time. While all this was happening, Christians were busy trying to reinstitute prayer in the schoolroom.

The people of North America are only six percent of the world's population, but we consume about one-third or all the world's nonrenewable resources. It would be naïve to assume that we would suddenly become virtuous and say, "Goodness, we are using more than our fair share of what's left. Let's change our style of live and share." It's not that easy, and we are not likely to become virtuous. But Christians, at least should be honest enough to call this consumption what it is: sin – sin written large! It is institutionalized and therefore less personal, but still our sin. We make it clear every day by our silence and our demands that we idolize our consumptive life and give this style a higher priority than we give to God.

God is concerned about justice. When the last car, having burned the last drop of oil, rolls to a stop in the middle of the highway, God will plant a cross in the middle of the highway against its front bumper. All the world's poor will gather under that cross, and God will say quietly to us, "The weightier matter of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"