

Justice, Mercy and Faithfulness (Matthew 23:23-24): Sustainability of any Relationship

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Introduction

Relationship must necessarily occur between God and humanity as well as between persons,¹ hence the existence of vertical and horizontal relationship. Genesis to Revelation is a true history of God's relationship with humanity and portrays God's impeccable faithfulness to humanity and humanity's unfaithfulness to God in their relationship at various periods in the history of the existence of persons on the surface of the earth (vertical relationship). The binding wire that keeps God and human beings in relationship from the inception till now is the unconditional love God has for humanity. The relationship between human beings can be described as the connection between two or more people or groups and their involvement with one another, especially as regards the way they behave towards and feel about one another (horizontal relationship). This embraces the way people are related by birth, adoption, and/or marriage² as well as every other relationship, including friendship and every level of relationship between people.

Authentic relationship can only be sustained by justice, mercy and faithfulness. A relationship that lacks any of these is heading to doom. These virtues are inseparably related to the extent that to miss one is to miss the rest. A tripod stand can't stand on one or two legs but on the three for optimal functioning. It is no exaggeration to say that humanity lost her relationship with God and subsequently lost the comfort of the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15-25) as a result of loosing those tripartite values that had sustained the original relationship God had with humankind (Gen 3:6-11). Hence, humanity fell apart with God and with one another as a result of living outside of those values. This is the origin of divisions and wars between people. Jesus, the eternal Word of God, took flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14) with the sole aim of returning humans to their original root; to make them to appreciate anew those values they have been neglecting. Jesus was the only one who could do this because he was in good communion with God. The implication is that his relationship with God was familial and unshakable. This is obvious because Jesus had, as his armor, these tripartite values namely, justice, mercy, and faithfulness. It is these tripartite values that he struggled throughout his earthly sojourn to impart on his followers, and thus, change the *status quo* that is being sustained among the Jews by Scribes and Pharisees. These two groups were the interpreters of the Law and those who took it upon themselves to put into full practice what the interpreters have interpreted. This, they ostensibly practiced, but in actual fact, they fundamentally missed the essence of keeping the interpreted rules. The essence of the law they failed to practice were what Jesus summarized as justice, mercy and faithfulness.

The Scribes, Pharisees and Relationship

¹ Ezeogamba Anthony, "Reconciliation (Matt 5:21-26): Inevitable Condition for Authentic Worship of God", Ngozi Chuma-Udeh (ed.), *ANSU Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 2. No. 2 (July 2015), 214-222.

² Microsoft Encarta 2009; 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation.

Jesus met three main Jewish sects during his earthly ministry and they include: the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. Each of these had their schools and followers. Our interest is restricted to the first sect, that is, the Pharisees, for the purpose of this article. Scribes are not actually a sect in Judaism but lawyers and professionals that read and interpreted the law. One can rightly say without any fear of contradiction that most scribes were Pharisees, adhering to the strict interpretation of the law (Matt 23:2,13-15). Hence, they were normally seen or grouped together. While the Scribes are the interpreters of the law, the Pharisees are those that put it into practice by strictly following the instructions of Deut 6:4-7. The Pharisee sect is rightly called the Law experts and quarrelled with Jesus more than any other group because of their blind obedience to the Law or rather because they saw Jesus as a threat to their position. They never had it easy with Jesus and hence received the highest condemnations from Jesus (Matt 6:2, 5,16; 15:7; 23). A Pharisee is like an “I” specialist, singing his own praises, off key, of course! The Pharisee of Luke 18:9-14 was telling God about all the good things he was doing for him, “praying, fasting, tithing, keeping laws” (Luke 18:12). He was almost demanding God to admire and approve of him.³ They are the group that John the Baptist called "brood of vipers", who rested complacently in their having Abraham as their progenitor (Matt 3:7-8). They are exact observers of the Law of Moses. They have a lot to do with the Hasidaeans. The Hasidaeans, a transcription of the Hebrew *chasidim* (Hasidim) i.e., pious ones, were a society of men zealous for religion, who acted under the guidance of the Scribes, in opposition to the godless Hellenizing party (Sadducees); they scrupled to oppose the legitimate High Priest even when he was on the side of the Greeks. Their fundamental principle was complete separation from non-Jewish elements, they were the strictly legal party among the Jews, and were ultimately the more popular and influential party. Hence, legalism is their watchword.⁴ It is no exaggeration to say that they follow law sheepishly. They follow the Law without understanding the spirit of the Law or the Lawgiver. Their interest is on the letters of the Law. It is this aspect of their life that made them always to be in opposition to Jesus' ministry. Josephus observed that when the Jewish people faced an important decision, they relied on the opinion of the Pharisees rather than on that of the king or high priest.⁵ They were not completely bad but their problem was that of ignorance, but they never knew it. Jesus, even in the midst of his anger against them, recognized that they were righteous but that their righteousness was not enough, hence he urged his followers that their righteousness must surpass that of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20). Jesus was not against them for keeping the minutia aspect of the law (Matt 5:18) but for not doing even the most essential. Let us not forget that Paul (Saul) was a member of this sect before his conversion to Christianity (Phil 3:4-7; Gal 1:14). It is a fact that the most bitter enemies that the apostles met during their missionary enterprise were the Hellenist Jews (Acts 13:45; 14:2-19; 17:5; 18:6). For instance, Paul, a disciple of the Pharisees, was exceedingly mad against the Christians during his struggle to uphold the traditions of the elders (Acts 26:11). In summary, Matthew Henry has this to say about the Pharisees: they "did not like a religion, which insisted so much on humility, self-denial, contempt of the world, and spiritual worship".⁶

³ Vima Dasam, *His Word Lives* (Mumbai: St Paul Press, 1999), 464-465.

⁴ W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1997), 853

⁵ J. I. Packer and M. C. Tenney (Eds.), *Nelson's Super Value Series: Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1980), 506.

⁶ Matthew Henry, "Pharisees", in www.biblestudytools.com. (accessed on 6th October, 2016).

As it affects the Scribes, it was Jeremiah who wrote, "The false pen of the scribes has turned the law of Yahweh into a lie".⁷ This reveals that their deviation from the law has been enduring. In the NT era "a scribe is the scholar and the intellectual of Judaism, who receives the title rabbi. His scholarship was the knowledge of the law, which he regarded as the sum of wisdom and the only true learning. His position in the Jewish community was a respected position of leadership".⁸ That is why as teachers of the law, how they taught was used to compare how Jesus taught his audience (Matt 7:29). In summary, they were sworn enemies of Jesus, to the extent that they were among the arresting party that Jesus faced (Mark 14:43). We shall still mention other qualities of Scribes and Pharisees in the course of this work.

Anyone who reads Matthew 23 alone without reading the preceding chapters and the ones that are following after it may most likely describe Jesus as an erratic man. No wonder Barclay in his effort to explain the anger of Jesus in Matthew 23 says:

If a man is characteristically and temperamentally an irritable, ill-tempered and irascible creature, notoriously given to uncontrolled outbursts of passionate anger, his anger is neither effective nor impressive. Nobody pays any attention to anger of a bad-tempered man. But when a person who is characteristically meek and lowly, gentle and loving, suddenly erupts into blazing wrath, even the most thoughtless person is shocked into taking thought. That is why the anger of Jesus is so awe-inspiring a sight. It is seldom in literature that we find so unsparing and sustained an indictment as we find in this chapter when the wrath of Jesus is directed against the Scribes and Pharisees.⁹

Jesus was angry because to him whom much is given, much is expected from him. Jesus knows that Scribes and Pharisees were sitting on Moses' seat (Matt 23:2). But they were not behaving like the one they were representing hence he was disappointed and warned his followers "...never to do as they were doing for they do not practice what they preach" (23:3b). Jesus did not therefore mince words in enumerating all the things he had against them (23:4-36). One of the things the Scribes and Pharisees never joked with was the paying of tithe, even before the arrival of Christ on earth. As a separated group, they did not encourage relationship either with God or others, they only knew themselves.

Tithe and Relationship: Tithe comes from the Hebrew word *'āśar* "to tithe", and "to be rich". The word "ten" is its derivative. The basic principle in tithing is the acknowledgment that everything rightly belongs to God, including one's own property, and that humans are only stewards. The tithe is a token brought to honor and to recognize God as the owner (Lev 27:30-33).¹⁰ Tithe resembles the taxes we pay today.

It is a responsibility that is not ethnically bound. It transcends Judaism. Tithing was very common throughout the ancient Near East, especially in Mesopotamia, where Neo-Babylonian texts from the sixth century BC discuss the collection of tithes as a means of supporting a sanctuary. There

⁷ John L. McKenzie, "Scribes", in *Dictionary of the Bible* (Bangalore: St Paul's Press, 2002), 780.

⁸ McKenzie, "Scribes", 780.

⁹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Vol. 2, Chapters 11-28; Bangalore: Theological Pub. 1997), 280-281.

¹⁰ Robertson Irvine, "Tithe", in Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, John Rea (Eds.), *Wycliffe Bible Dictionary* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Pub. 2005), 1718.

also, the sanctuary included sacred banquets and the personnel, namely, the Levites and Chief Priests.¹¹ In the OT, the tithe appears as a religious tax; the practice is old and not limited to Israel, the tithes paid to Melchizedek by Abraham (Gen 14:20) and promised to Yahweh by Jacob (Gen 28:22) may well represent old cultic practices. The oldest certain allusion to tithes is Amos 4:4, which mentions tithes paid at Bethel.¹² Deut 14:22-29 spelt out clearly what tithe is all about. It presents tithe also as the tenth part of one's annual income, which was mainly farm products. It was meant to be presented to a place designated by Yahweh as his dwelling place but it was the presenter of the tithe that makes merry with the tithe as he wishes, but without neglecting the Levites. Furthermore, during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the tithe precisely was a tax collected at the Temple to support the priests and Levites (Neh 10:37-38; 12:44; 13:5, 12).

Deut 26:12-15 carried this further by expressing clearly those who are to benefit from the paid tithe, especially the ones paid in the third year. Those to benefit from the tithe include: the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows. Deut 26:13 says, after paying the tithe speak thus, "I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites...". The tithes people paid then were also meant to furnish the Temple. Num 18:21-32 mandates the Levites to collect all tithes from Israelites and pay the tithe of tithes to Aaron, and specifies other ways of making use of it. This phenomenon probably undergirds the good relationship of the scribes and Pharisees with the Levites and the Chief Priests. They were partners because they enjoyed the fruit of tithing together. Anyone, therefore, who attacks the Scribes and Pharisees, was indirectly touching the pockets of the Levites and Chief Priest. Thus, a Pharisee does not joke with his tithes (Luke 18:11, 12; Matt 23:23). He sees the payment of tithes as keeping God's commandment and not to observe that commandment was seen as stealing from God (Mal 2:8-10). Jesus never condemned the payment of tithes but was against taking the payment of tithe as supreme legislation or as the only thing that is necessary.

The Exegesis of Matt 23:23-24

Our interest here is to exegetically study Matt 23:23-24 so as to understand the meaning of its contents.

The Unity of Matt 23:23-24

As regards the structure of Matthew, scholars vary so much. There is, therefore, no generally accepted structure of this Gospel among scholars. For this write up, we shall adopt a six-fold structure without minding the five discourses and five narratives, which appear alternatively with one another in the Gospel. This structure is based on the geographical location of the Messiah and his followers as he evangelized.¹³ They include: (1) The Introduction of the Messiah (1:1-4:11); (2) The revelation of the Messiah in words and deeds in Galilee (4:12-16:20); (3) From Galilee to Jerusalem, the Messiah and his followers prepare for the confrontation (16:21-20:34); (4) the Messiah is seen in confrontation with the religious authorities in Jerusalem (21:1-25:46); (5) The

¹¹ Marvin A. Sweeney, "Tithe", in Paul J. Achtemeier (Ed.), *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (Bangalore: Theological Pub. 1994), 1078.

¹² McKenzie, "Scribes", 894.

¹³ Anthony Ezeogamba, "If All Christians Were Really Salt and Light (Matt 5:13-16): Corruption Would Have Been Eradicated From the World", in *The International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 8, No. 7. 2015 (<http://universitypublications.net/ijas/087/index.html>), 269.

rejection, killing and vindication of the Messiah in Jerusalem (26:1–28:15); (6) the launching of the Messianic mission in Galilee (28:16-20).¹⁴

Our interest here lies with the fourth section, which deals with Jesus' confrontation with the religious authorities, namely, the Scribes and Pharisees as well as sanctuary officers. This section can still be broken down into five subsections namely: (1) the beginning of the confrontation (21:1-27); (2) the three polemical parables (21:28–22:14); (3) the three challenges and a counterchallenge (22:15-46); (4) Jesus' verdict on Jerusalem and its leadership (23:1–24:2); (5) and finally, the end of the old order and the reign of the Son of man (24:3–25:46). The fourth subsection where the unit we want to analyse lies can also be divided further into four sections, namely, (a) warning against the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-12); (b) seven woes on the Scribes and Pharisees (23:13-36); (c) judgement on Jerusalem (23:37-39); (d) Jesus leaves the temple and predicts its destruction (24:1-2). Again, the present writer is not dealing with the whole woes Jesus heaped on the Scribes and Pharisees but the very smaller unit (vv. 23-24), which deals with the fourth woes. The two verses are closely knit together to the extent that they melt into each other. One throws more light on the understanding of the other. We shall now treat them verse-by-verse.

The Fourth Woes (Vv. 23-24)

This is a smaller unit that deals also with the meticulous concern for detail, which leaves the essential principle of relationship (with God and man) undone. Put differently, this section exposes the strictness and preciseness with which the Scribes and Pharisees carry out small matters of the law and how careless and loose they are in weightier matters. Thus, it is good to note that chapter 23 began by acknowledging the exalted social and religious position of the Scribes and Pharisees (v. 2). Part of the anger of Jesus was that they have not been able to use it to effect justice, hence should be humbled (v. 12; 9:36; cf. Ezek 34).¹⁵ Jesus was annoyed against them because they failed to use their exalted position to show mercy and understand the plight of people around them; hence they went about interpreting the law wrongly (Matt 12:1-14; 15:1-20). Hence, "It is bad to keep away from Christ ourselves, but it is worse to keep others from him . . . they do not love that any should go beyond them in religion or be better than they. Their not going in was a hindrance to many; for, they having so great an influence on the people, multitudes rejected the gospel only because their leaders did".¹⁶ This reminds one of the question the Sanhedrin asked the officers who were asked to go and arrest Jesus, "...have any of the rulers, or of the Pharisees, believed on him?" (John 7:47-49).

So, verse 23, like the previous verses (13 and 14), has *ouai humin*—"woe to you". These verses parallel Isa 10:1, 2. Woe is an expression of dissatisfaction by one who has a better knowledge of what the other has been doing blindly and feeling that he has been doing well. It is also a feeling of disappointment by a supervisor/superior over one who ought to have known the right thing. Jesus abused the Scribes and Pharisees not because they paid tithes, but because in doing that, they neglected, and indeed, did away with the true meaning of the "prophets and law" which is "love of God and love of neighbour" (Matt 7:12; 22:37-40). The implication is that religious practices

¹⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Michigan: Grand Rapids 2007), vii-xv.

¹⁵ Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins, A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (India: Theological Pub. 2007), 459.

¹⁶ Matthew Henry, "Exegesis of Matt. 23:23-24" in www.biblestudytools.com (accessed on 6th October, 2016).

must necessarily elicit cordial relationship. One, who worships God, must have been one, who is at home with his fellow men and women. Jesus eventually, through his death on the cross, reconciled the Jews and Gentiles, thus condemning and destroying all barriers which negative religious understanding had previously caused. Through this means he made those who believe in him to be members of the same family (Eph 2:11-22). It was in the process of achieving that goal that he had to pronounce “woes” on whoever he felt had been blocking that achievement.

The *ouai humin* was directed against the *grammateis* and *Pharisaioi* (scribes and Pharisees). Both nouns are in plural, which tells us that Jesus was not actually addressing a particular Scribe or Pharisee but all of them because the action he was fighting against was very rampant among them. He called them *hupokritai* (hypocrites). This is also in the plural hence he addresses all of them as such. Thus presenting them as people, who are feigning being highly principled yet they are far from that; pretending to have admirable qualities, principles and beliefs, but unfortunately behaving otherwise or differently. A "hypocrite is a stage-player, in religion, he who personates or acts the part of one that he neither is nor may be. Their religion is vain".¹⁷ This explains the meaning of this prayer by a Pharisee, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income" (Luke 18:11-12). In the light of the above, Henry describes the Pharisees thus,

For a pretence they made long prayers; very long indeed, if it be true which some of the Jewish writers tell us, that they spent three hours at a time in the formalities of meditation and prayer and did it thrice everyday, which is more than an upright soul, that makes a conscience of being inward with God in the duty, dares pretend ordinarily to do; but to the Pharisees it was enough, who never made a business of the duty, and always made a trade of the outside of it. By this craft they got their wealth and maintained their grandeur.¹⁸

The Scribes and Pharisees are hypocritical like circumcision was the clock of the Shechemites' covetousness (Gen 34:22-26); again the payment of a vow in Hebrew the cover of Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam 15:7) against his father; furthermore, a fast was declared in Jazreel so as to cover Naboth's murder, and easy acquisition of his vineyard (1 Kings 21:9-15); a celibate with a hidden child and invariably a hidden wife. These are all hypocritical actions.

Why did Jesus address them as hypocrites? This, Jesus portrays with the verb *apodekatoute* ("you tithe", Second person plural, present active indicative from the verb *apodekatoō* "to tithe"). It implies to give a tenth part of one's annual earning. Jesus never quarrelled with the idea of tithing but with the *modus operandi*. They were very exact in paying tithes, which ordinarily would have received commendations if they were not doing it just to be seen and admired by all, and if they were doing that together with other things that are commanded by the law. Alternatively, if they had followed the spirit of paying tithe, they would have been admired positively. It is wrong to be just to the priests and Levites that receive the tithes, and at the same time, to cheat and defraud every other person. To act and behave that way is to mock God.

¹⁷ Matthew Henry, "Exegesis of Matt 23:23-24".

¹⁸ Matthew Henry, "Exegesis of Matt 23:23-24".

In trying to attract people to themselves they tithe even things that were never prescribed by the law for instance, “mint,” the Ethiopic version of manuscript reads “hyssop”. Mint is a garden herb. It was used to sprinkle the floors of their houses and synagogues to produce a pleasant fragrance. Another herb they devoted their time in tithing is dill or anise. Instead of “anise” Munster’s Hebrew Gospel has “rue”, which in the Mishna is mentioned along with “mint” as it is by Luke 11:42. “Anise” has a fine aromatic smell, and is used by confectioners and perfumers. Another garden herb that attracted their attention is “cumin” – a sort of anise.¹⁹ This is a plant of the same genus, like “fennel” and used for similar purposes. From explanations already given, it is clear that these are all herbs of little value. In Deut 14:22-29; 26:12-15; Lev 27:30-33; Num 18:21-32; Mal 3:8-12, the law of Moses states that they should pay tithes of the fruits of the earth and never precisely nor specifically did any of the above mentioned herbs get specific mention.²⁰ But despite the fact that they were not mentioned, the Scribes and Pharisees maintained that they ought to be tithed, hence their constant boast, "I give tithes of all that I possess" (Luke 18:12). In other words, Jesus was saying: "they were precise in doing small matters which the law had not expressly commanded, while they omitted the greater things of which it had enjoined".²¹ Again, Jesus has no objection to tithing to the extent of minutiae, "what he objects to is the unbalanced piety which sets great store by these relatively insignificant rules but misses the things that really matter".²² They were obsessed with the most trifling products of the earth and missed the most essential. This verse has its parallel in Luke 11:42 where “rue” was added and all manner of herbs as well. Their rigid interpretation no doubt was based on Lev 27:30.

This over emphasis on the law of tithing and even on over tithing made them to *aphēkate*, which is second person plural first aorist, active indicative from the word *aphiēmi* "to have left or neglected". According to France, by the use of the word, “‘neglect’ emphasis is placed on the ‘weightier matters’ as the primary obligation, leaving the acceptance of the tithing rules as the minor element, perhaps to be read more as a concession than as enthusiastic endorsement”.²³ Thus, Jesus regarded other things that have been occupying their minds as trivial and sees the ones they left undone as the essences of the law. He sees those they have neglected as the weightier matters. “Weightier or heavier matters” do not indicate that they were more difficult or harder to practice than the ones he termed trifles. Weightier from the point of view of encouraging more the relationship that ought to exist between God and humankind, and trifles from the point of view that they encourage relationship only between the Scribes, Pharisees and Levites and not even among all of them.

Jesus went ahead to list the heavier or weightier matters and they include *krisin*, *eleos* and *pistin*. These are partially rendered into English language as judgement, mercy and faithfulness respectively. It is good to mention out rightly that no English word captures the full implications of those Greek words. The ones we have are attempts to interpret them. There are other aspect of the law that appear also very important, which are even equivalent to the above mentioned three and they include: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt 7:12). Acknowledge the one who comes in the name of the Lord (Matt 23:37-39). And he said to him, “‘you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with

¹⁹ Grill's Exposition of the Entire Bible. www.biblehub.com (accessed on 6th October, 2016)

²⁰ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 458.

²¹ Matthew Henry, "Exegesis of Matt 23:23-24"

²² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 872-873

²³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 873.

all your soul, and with all your mind'. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt 22:37-39). This captures clearly the vertical and horizontal relationship we have already mentioned above, which mercy, justice and faithfulness capture clearly.

krisis: This term readily translates the Hebrew *mišpat*, which refers to fair judicial processes for the great, and little, wealthy and poor (Lev 19:15; Deut 1:17), the rescue of the oppressed, and advocacy and protection for the widow, orphan, weak and poor (Isa 1:17, 21-23; 3:13-15). These are nuances to the meaning of the word *krisis*. This is part of the reason why we said above that judgment or justice cannot conveniently translate it. This word also denotes the eschatological day of accountability for doing or neglecting God's will (Matt 5:21-22; 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36, 41-42).²⁴ One can say without equivocation that *krisis* can mean any of the following though not fully—justice, judgement, and condemnation.

The second heavier demand of the law is *pistis*: This is readily translated as “faith” in English. But faith here does not necessarily mean only faith in God but also faithfulness, sincere and honest dealings with men, in opposition to fraud, cheating and circumventions. It simply means saying yes and sticking to your yes-ness. It demands consistency in action. What a faithful one says in the morning is what he says all day long. What he says in the dark is what he repeats in the light. In covenant relationships as expressed in OT, from Genesis to the last book of the OT, God is presented as the faithful one and humankind fluctuates, thus breaks the relationship from time to time.²⁵ This can be fully conceptualized if one reflects the promises a man and a woman make to one another at the altar during their wedding (“I will be faithful to you, both in good and in bad times”), but it is only God that knows what happens behind the scene after the wedding. *Pistis* also stand for openness to Jesus, which seeks his power, trusting it to overcome obstacles, and transform situations of need (Matt 8:10; 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28; 17:20; 21:21). It is piety towards God, confidence in him. It means giving God his due.²⁶ Here, this word *pistis* means “faithfulness” or “trustworthiness” to God or fellow citizens.

The third of the heavier matters is *eleos*: This translates the Hebrew word - *hesed*: It can mean compassion or mercy. Mercy brings money, community, food, healing, forgiveness, a new life (Matt 9:13; 12:7). Religious leaders exhibit its lack in Matt 9:10-13; 12:1-8.²⁷ Mercy can mean charitable behaviour in helping the miserable and afflicted. The Scribes and Pharisees have not shown mercy or faith. There are numerous signs that they resisted and contested Jesus' display of merciful power among the poor and needy (Matt 9:3, 11, 34; 12:2, 14, 23-24). All the merciful healings that Jesus did on a Sabbath were contested by the Scribes and Pharisees.²⁸

The greatest problem the Scribes and Pharisees had was that they did not devote the same care to working out the practical implications of these basic principles as they did to the minutiae of tithing herbs. Were equal energy had been given to these three heavier values, Jesus would not have

²⁴ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 459.

²⁵ Grills Exposition of the Entire Bible.

²⁶ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 459.

²⁷ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 459.

²⁸ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 459.

complained against them. The implications of these three values that were neglected by the leaders of the people are that their practice of the law of tithing “lacks human face”.

Blind Guides (v.24)

Tuphloi hodēgoi: These are the same words Jesus used already for the Scribes and Pharisees in v.16 - "blind guides". This shows that they are leaders that know nothing. In a certain state in Nigeria, for instance, a sitting governor calls for certificate verification and qualification of teachers in both primary and secondary schools. It was very unfortunate that one of the teachers could not read the contents of her certificates. Only God knows the quality of pupils she has been churning out. Those that received the baptism of John claimed that they have never heard that there is anything like the Holy Spirit. The present writer passed through a primary school where in primary one they were taught in Mathematics that 2 divides 3 was impossibility but 2 divides 4 was a possibility. Later in primary three, they were thought that 2 divides 3 there is remainder one. Once one arrives at remainder, he claims that he has arrived at the final answer. It was in their primary five and six that teachers broke the remainder into fraction. Only God knows the fate of pupils that dropped out after primary one and what they will teach those close to them. The question every Nigerian should ask is: what type of appointment do you expect from a president who has no knowledge of the military? What type of vice chancellor do you expect from a president who has never entered and sat for lectures in any University or any higher institution of learning if left alone to appoint one? What do you expect from a leader who is dogmatic as regards obedience to tradition? What type of leadership or output does one expect from a catholic priest whose knowledge is not grounded on the doctrines of the church or who is ignorant of the code of Canon Law, documents of the church and papal pronouncements, especially when such a priest happens to be in charge of an adoration ground? Proper reflection and answer to these rhetorical questions will help one to appreciate the reason why Jesus suddenly changed the name of the Scribes and Pharisees to "Blind Leaders".

They were branded “blind leaders” because their teachings were misleading; they were unreliable guides who lead people not into the empire of God but into hell (Matt 23:13-15). They were blind leaders both in teaching and behaviour. In v. 16, Jesus called them blind guides for their corrupt teaching but here in v. 24, he calls them that again because of their corrupt living. It is good to note that though the condition of those whose guides are blind is very sad, yet that of the blind guides themselves is yet more woeful.²⁹ This is because "...the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating...and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Luke 12:47-48). "If anyone of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt 18:6). In summary, a blind cannot lead a blind otherwise both will fall into a ditch (Matt 15:14; Luke 6:39). Matthew 23 presents us with the litany of woes Jesus pronounced against the Scribes and Pharisees for living below expectations and for struggling to lead all astray. Jesus had expected them to be models in showing justice, in being merciful and faithful.

To drive his point home, Jesus employed picturesque kinds of words. He exaggerated facts to stress an idea. It is deliberate exaggeration for the sake of emphasis. This is called hyperbole. Amos used it when he described an Amorite warrior as one "whose height was like the height of

²⁹ Matthew Henry, "Exegesis of Matt 23:23-24".

the cedars" (Amos 2:9). Other examples include, 1 Kings 1:40; Gen 22:17. On the verse under review, Jesus used hyperbole to express his idea well. He says, "You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel" (v. 24). They went about *diulizontes* their drinks of gnat and yet they swallow camels. That word is a present active participle, nominative plural masculine from the word *diulizō* meaning, "I strain". Another funny word used is *katapinontes*, which is also present active participle, nominative plural masculine from the word *katapinō* meaning I swallow. You can imagine one who is very meticulous trying to strain out a gnat or tiny flies and at the same time closing his eyes and swallowing a camel. Commenting on the above, Barclay says, "This is a humorous picture which must have raised a laugh, of a man carefully straining his wine through gauze to avoid swallowing a microscopic insect and yet cheerfully swallowing a camel. It is the picture of a man who has completely lost his sense of proportion".³⁰ The expression is proverbial and which signifies that the Pharisees pretended to be exceedingly afraid of the smallest faults, as if sin had been bitter to them like death, while they indulged themselves secretly in the unrestrained commission of the grossest of immoralities.³¹

The grotesque imagery of straining out the gnat from wine or water before drinking and swallowing the camel belongs to the same class of burlesque as the splinter and the plank in Matt 7:3-5 or the camel going through the eye of a needle in Palestine. The language is witty, hyperbolic and ridicules the elite. It is derived from several important pieces and closely fits v. 23. Hence, while the Pharisees and Scribes seek to be obedient in the tiniest detail, they err by overlooking and thereby neglecting big matters.³² They will not see the camel that blocks their view yet they will observe the little gnat in other people's eye. The gnat, as an insect, was among the things proscribed as an unclean insect by the Jewish law (Lev 11:20-23). The same thing holds for the swarming creatures of Lev 11:41-44, and therefore, must be rejected; but then the camel was no less unclean (Lev 11:4) and a lot bigger. The sweetness of the joke has actually been lost in translation. This is because pun is lost in translation. Joke was helped by an Aramaic wordplay between *qalmâ* (gnat) and *gamlâ* (camel).³³ Considering the size of a camel and gnat one discovers that it is very easy to swallow a gnat without knowing it, but no one can swallow a camel, if possible, without a full conscious effort. The Joke is that you carry out even harder tasks, but to do the simple ones that make a relationship to be eternal, you are found seriously wanting.

In summary, the following are the ways through which they swallow camel: "When they devoured widows' houses, they did indeed swallow a camel; when they gave Judas the price of innocent blood, and yet scrupled to put the returned money into the treasury (27:6); when they would not go into the judgment-hall, for fear of being defiled, and yet would stand at the door, and cry out against Jesus (John 18:28); when they quarreled with disciples for eating with unwashed hands, and yet, for the filling of the corban, taught people how to break the fifth commandment, they strained out gnats, or lesser things, and yet swallowed a camel.³⁴ These are hypocritical actions. They know how to bend the rule to suit them to the detriment of others. They go for bigger ones and neglect the ones that are most essential. The idea Jesus wants to portray with the swallowing of camel and straining out a gnat or paying tithe and yet not observing the law of justice, mercy and faithfulness can be likened to the analogy Paul gave in 1 Cor 13:1-13. Whatever you do without

³⁰ Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 294.

³¹ Matthew Henry, "Exegesis of Matt. 23:23-24".

³² Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 459.

³³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 824.

³⁴ Matthew Henry, "Exegesis of Matt. 23:23-24".

love, you are just wasting your time and yourself. Again, it is very clear that at the foundation of the above named indispensable tripartite values is love. Judgment or justice without love is useless, mercy without love is mockery and faithfulness without love is a monumental deceit.

Evaluation: From all that we have analyzed above, it is clear that Jesus was not against the paying of tithe as such but was against unbalanced spirituality. He does not accept 99% but 100%. If one could avoid swallowing a gnat considering how little it is, it would even be easier for such a person to avoid swallowing bigger things like a camel. Tithes are paid with the product of one's labour and therefore paid by those who are working and not by those who are not working. Levites are mandated to pay the tithe of tithes. That means that he is only permitted to pay tithe when he has received tithes. But the practice of justice/judgment, mercy and faith needs no effort to accomplish. The only thing one needs is the practical natural gifts from God like reasoning and understanding. To live in a community where injustice, wickedness, and hypocrisy are the order of the day and one keeps quiet and at the same time claims to be in good communion with God is guilty of swallowing a camel and straining out gnats. It is said that the reason evil thrives unabated is because those who ought to talk are not talking.

Recommendations:

It is a fact that some of those, who claim to be leaders, lack basic training; hence they do not know things that they ought to have known ordinarily. What is applicable in religion is also applicable in academics, political, business and social world. In Nigeria, for instance, the source of corruption is absence of justice, mercifulness and faithfulness in dealing with one another.

- This work seriously recommends the formation of healthy conscience.
- Taking Catholic priesthood for instance, this article recommends that before one can be said to have qualified to be a leader he must have been properly groomed in the Sacred Scripture, contents of the Code of Canon Law, Contents of the Vatican II documents, other Magisterial teachings of the church as well as training in leadership. In the pages of these he will discover justice, mercy and faithfulness.
- To be a president of Nigeria, for example, after training in leadership, acquiring of necessary academic qualifications, a firm grip of the constitution, and knowledge of the contour of Nigeria, will arm him with a sense of justice, mercy and faithfulness as they affect the application of the Nigerian constitution, because law enforcement must have human face.

Conclusion

It is my conviction that there remain conflict, corruption, deceit in the world today because we are not living according to the demands of Matthew 23:23-24. A proper understanding of mercy, faithfulness and justice and their proper application in any relationship ensures the sustainability of that relationship be it vertical or horizontal relationship.