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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

[patrickjmarrin@gmail.com](mailto:patrickjmarrin@gmail.com).

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“Blind guides, who strain out the gnat and swallow the camel” Matt 23:24).

In an exchange on the papal plane with a reporter on the use of condoms to prevent HIV-Aids in Africa, Pope Francis said the question was too small in the face of much larger issues: “I don’t like getting into questions or reflections that are so technical when people die because they don’t have water or food or housing,” he said. When those problems were taken care of, he said, complex moral questions like condoms and Aids can be addressed.

To illustrate his point, the Pope cited the preoccupation by the scribes and Pharisees with Sabbath observance while Jesus was concerned with human hunger and need in the Gospels. It was not about keeping the law, but about proportion and emphasis in distinguishing between big issues and secondary concerns.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus again unleashes a barrage of criticism at the religious leaders of his time for being obsessed with small obligations while neglecting the weightier things of the law like “judgment and mercy and fidelity.” They paid tithes on their garden herbs, cleaned the outside of vessels but neglected to remove the “plunder and self-indulgence” on the inside.

Jesus called them hypocrites, actors who wore masks that concealed their real faces while they played the part of righteous and virtuous men. It was all about appearances, status and privilege, when in fact they were filled with pride and arrogance.

It becomes a spiritual exercise for disciples to prioritize their concerns over self-improvement and the call to service. We, too, can obsess over ritual observance and

examining our consciences while missing the daily challenges of love and simply being responsive to the needs of others. Being available, taking time to listen to people may seem like a small thing, but it is the essence of accompaniment and respect.

The day goes by and we are freed from thinking about ourselves. Life is hardly ever in the big things, but in the details that make others feel recognized and valued. But when the big things do appear, we are ready to respond in, having cultivated the habits of the heart that enable us to be present to both big and small.

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