Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





by Pat Marrin

View Author Profile
patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“You have paid tithes on your spice garden but have neglected judgment, mercy and fidelity” (Matthew 23:24).

2 Thes 2:1-3A, 14-17; Matt 23:23-26

Today’s Gospel continues Jesus’ excoriation of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus calls them hypocrites for paying attention to small things but neglecting the weightier demands of the law. In numerous confrontations over the first commandment, Jesus affirmed that love organizes the whole moral and religious life. If we do not understand or if we ignore this priority, keeping every lesser commandment will not add up to real holiness.

The scribes and Pharisees had multiplied the basic Torah into 613 separate commandments. Only they knew the intricate system of rules about every conceivable kind of personal and social behavior, so ordinary people were consigned to a confusing state of failure and sinfulness. Only by going to the rabbis and priests could they learn how to please God.

Jesus attacked the leadership because they were misguiding the people, blocking access to a loving and merciful God, using their official status to enrich and

empower themselves. Matthew’s Gospel focuses on Jesus as the new Moses, sent to liberate people from the slavery of all these legal and ritual systems that were ignoring the primary commandments. God did not want sacrifice or legalism; God invited everyone to experience and show love.

Pope Francis’ emphasis on the mercy of God is a continuation of this same lesson in priorities. Come to God without fear. Forgiveness is always being offered. The path to holiness is a lifelong struggle, but never lose heart, just keep going forward. Failure and weakness teach us compassion. God loves sinners and works with them as they learn from their mistakes. Seek first the Kingdom of God, and everything else will be provided.

While this approach confounds some religious leaders who want obedience to the letter of the law and hard sacrifice as proof of worthiness, Pope Francis’ message is "good news" to real people caught in the ambiguities of life. The truth is that love is far more difficult and demanding than keeping rules. Love is never finished, always a work in progress, a goal and not an achievement. But it leads us to God, and in the end, this is the only thing that really matters.

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