

“I desire mercy and not sacrifice”

Two times in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus quoted the same passage from Hosea 6:6, where God says: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”. This He did, addressing the Pharisees and their lack of mercy. Most of us know pretty well this class of religious people. However, the thing is that we have difficulty to imagine that if we do not have mercy then we are like them, Pharisees. But let’s get into more detail.

The first occasion where the Lord used that passage of Hosea, was at the calling of Matthew, the then tax collector, and later apostle and evangelist. Matthew himself describes the scene:

Matthew 9:9-13

“As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” So he arose and followed Him. Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard that, He said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. “But go and learn what this means: **‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.**”

The Pharisees were not wrong: those with whom the Lord was eating were indeed sinners and tax collectors. Because of this they thought that the Lord should have not even gotten near to these people. But they ignored that He came exactly for these people! While the Pharisees, were saying “do not get close to them; they are sinners”, the Lord was saying: “I’ll eat and drink with them, because I came to seek them and call them back to repentance”. It is the same also today: if we avoid the “sinners” – as if we

are “sinless” - then we are like the Pharisees. Their pride had made them to classify themselves as “sinless” and did not allow them to show mercy to whoever they considered as “sinner”. But God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, which is again a passage from the Old Testament (Proverbs 3:34, Septuagint (Note: Septuagint is the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament; about 2/3 of the quotations of the Old Testament come from this version)) :

James 4:6

“But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: “**God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.**”

And 1 Peter 5:5

“Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for “**God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.**”

Humility is what God looks for. And this is what the Pharisees and their likes – and we many times – lacked. An example of this behavior we find in Luke 18:9-14:

Luke 18:9-14

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ‘I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ “And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ “I tell you, this man went down to his house

justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

God loves the humble hearts and despises the prideful. He does not look how many good works we achieved, what we did or did not do. If what we did was not done out of a humble heart, showing mercy to others, then it has the same zero value as the works of the self righteous, prideful, Pharisees had. For the Lord “desires mercy and not sacrifice”. But the Pharisees ignored this and many times we ignore it too: too many religious works, too little mercy.

The second time we see the Lord addressing the Pharisees, using the same passage from Hosea 6:6, is in Matthew 12. There we read:

Matthew 12:1-8

“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: “how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? “Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? “Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. **“But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.** “For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

The Pharisees knew very well the letter of the law. Strictly speaking, according to the letter, they were correct. But as Paul said:

2 Corinthians 3:5-6

“Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, **not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**”

Sticking just to the letter, without the spirit, is a recipe to become not a servant of God but a Pharisee. For example, the letter was saying “keep the Sabbath”. But if mercy required it, for example for healing somebody, the commandment about the Sabbath had no effect. **Mercy was and is bigger than any commandment. Because the biggest commandment of all is to love one another.** As Matthew 22:37-40 tells us:

“Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ “This is the first and great commandment. “And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ “**On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.**”

And as 1 John 4:20 tells us:

“If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”

Loving God is the first commandment but to say that we love God without loving one another is a lie. We can truly say “I love God” only if we love one another. And this is the top commandment. The Pharisees could not understand this. They could not understand that the whole law and the prophets hanged on loving God and one another. The commandment of the Sabbath and any other commandment was subordinate to loving one another and showing mercy to one another. This was the spirit of the law.

But they knew and accepted only the letter. They were informed even to the last detail about the letter. What to do, when to do it, how to do it, what were the requirements, the days, the seasons, the quantities. They knew everything concerning the LETTER of the law, but they were missing everything about the SPIRIT of the law, the humility, the mercy and love to one another. As the Lord once told them:

Matthew 23:23

“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.”

The scribes and Pharisees were first in paying tithes and last in justice, mercy and faith. But justice, mercy, faith is the main point, the weightier, the more important matters of the law. These are also the things that stem out of a humble heart, the kind of heart God looks for. It does not matter how much we tithe or what other sacrifices we do. If you deny to show mercy to our fellow men then we too are Pharisees. To say it in another way: the only thing that decides whether we are a Pharisee or a true servant of God is not our sacrifices but the mercy and love to one another we show. True servants of God show mercy to their fellow men. Pharisees on the other hand make sacrifices, without mercy. For Pharisees and their likes – we many times - what matters is the outwardly things, especially things that others could see that they are doing, thus feeding their pride and egoism. As Matthew 23:1-7, 13-14 tells us:

“Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. “Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. “For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. “But all their works they do to

be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. “They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, “greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’..... “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

The main characteristic of the Pharisaic behavior is hypocrisy. A Pharisee plays it godly, but his heart is ungodly. He plays it humble, while he is full of pride. He puts heavy burdens on men’s shoulders but he does not even want to touch these burdens. He makes long and endless prayers but at the same time devours the houses of widows. Outwardly he seems religious and godly, but inwardly is full of pride with zero mercy. To the degree we behave like this we too are Pharisees. And this is what religion does many times: it is Pharisaic i.e. hypocritical, burdensome, merciless, and proud. Compare the behavior of the Pharisees and whoever imitates them, with that of Jesus. They had no mercy for the “sinners”. He was eating with them, trying to heal them. They were doing everything, so that they are seen by others. But He was doing miracles and hiding Himself or told those healed to NOT spread the news. Why? Because He lived what He taught. He had said:

Matthew 6:1-6

“Take heed that you do **not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them.** Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. “Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. **“But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, “that your charitable deed may be in secret;**

and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly. “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

This is what He taught, and this is what He also did. That’s why He was hiding after the miracles.

To conclude: Justice, mercy, faith and loving one another is what matters. Not sacrifice. Our God has no need of you and me offering anything to Him. Our religious celebrations, or rules mean nothing to Him, when we have no mercy. In this unmerciful world, God wants us to be His messengers of mercy. In this unjust world, we are to do justice. In this faithless age He wants us to have faith. It is in that sense that the Lord said that we are the salt and the light of the earth:

Matthew 5:13-16

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. “Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Because of people who walk in mercy, justice and faith this world has some light, our light, in it. Let us keep this and let this light, the light of Lord, shine through us in this

world, pleasing our Father, walking not in dead religious works but in mercy, justice and faith, exactly as our Master did. Because as Micah 6:8 says:

Micah 6:8

“He has shown you, O man, what is good; **And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?**”