

MAJORING ON THE MINORS

I am a writer and one of the things I love to write about is the common themes I see in widely separated passages of Scripture. These connections – and there are a myriad of them – show me that God is indeed the Author as He inspired such a great variety of writers over such a long period of time to say such similar things. When I see a common theme and write about it, the theme is the focus of what I write.

I learned something about a common theme the Pharisees of Jesus' day had seen and latched onto. If it hadn't been so tragic, it would have been laughable.

In Matthew 23 Jesus begins a lengthy tirade against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. One of the first things He says is, "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long" (23:5). Phylacteries were boxes containing four specific Scripture passages, worn on the forehead and arm. I would liken them to an advertisement of sorts to let people know that they followed the Law to the letter.

So let's do an experiment. Take a few moments and think of what verses of Scripture you would put in your boxes if you were an Old Testament Jew. I think mine would surely contain the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17), the Shema – "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" --(Deut. 6:4-5), the blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 – "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace" – and perhaps some Messianic promise like Deut. 18:18 – "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put My words in his mouth, and He will tell them everything I command Him."

If I could find a common theme in my choice of verses, I guess it would have to be pleasing God, that is, obeying His commandments, loving Him with all my being, putting my hope in His Messiah, and in return knowing His blessing.

What I found so tragic in the Pharisees' choice of verses was their common theme: "tie these on your hand and on your forehead." While it's true that the context of each passage contains important values, the fact that they chose to major on the minor part of each verse is terribly sad. In fact, only two of the four passages actually say to do it; the other two say following the commandments will be like doing it.

So what's the application here? I think in a general sense, we can see why the church today is so ineffective. We major on the minors. We have chosen to define ourselves by what divides us rather than what unites us. We are divided over theology, methods of baptism, interpretation of end times prophecy, grace versus works, and worship styles, to name just a few. That doesn't necessarily translate to all churches being hypocritical, as the Pharisees were; we all have reasons and generally Scriptural backing for what we believe and practice. But I have to wonder if the church at large wouldn't be a lot more effective in the world today if we all focused more on what Jesus said were the two greatest commandments: love God and love others as ourselves.

On a personal level, I have to ask myself what are the things that I advertise, as it were, and what do they say about me? As others look at me, what would they say is the common theme in my life? Is it materialism, accumulating as much stuff as I can? Is it desire for personal importance, influence, and power? Is it just pleasing myself, doing whatever feels best at the moment? Is it studying hard to display intellectual superiority? Or is it loving and serving God and others to the best of my ability?

I make no claim to perfection. There are more than hints of materialism in my life – we have a lot of nice stuff. Personal affirmation is immensely gratifying to me. I often do what I want rather than what I know I should do. I hope my study of the Scripture is a blessing to others rather than just a plum in my heavenly academic record. Because I do love God and want to serve Him and those people He has put in my life. I want to major on the majors, not the minors.

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