

The local library was an exciting part of my childhood. For a season, my stack of checked out books frequently included one from the Amelia Bedelia series. On the first page of the first book, Amelia starts her first day as the housekeeper for Mr. and Mrs. Rogers. Mrs. Rogers leaves her with a list. Amelia Bedelia obediently does every task on the list. And yet, when Mrs. Rogers sees her work, we read that “she was very angry.” How can you be angry when someone strictly follows every detail of everything you have asked them to do? If you have read the books, you know how she could be angry. Here is how Amelia Bedelia checks the first two items off the list.ⁱ

*“Now let’s see what this list says.” Amelia Bedelia read, **Change the towels in the green bathroom.** Amelia Bedelia found the green bathroom. “Those towels are very nice. Why change them?” she thought. Then Amelia Bedelia remembered what Mrs. Rogers has said. She must do just what the list told her. “Well, all right,” said Amerlia Bedelia. Amelia Bedelia got some scissors. She snipped a little here and a little there. And she changed those towels. “There, said Amelia Bedelia. She looked at her list again, **Dust the furniture.** Did you ever hear tell of such a silly thing. At my house we undusted the furniture. But to each his own way.”*

She continued to check things off the list in this diligent and literal way. To draw the drapes, she used a colored pencil and paper. To dress the chicken, she made some small clothes to fit. You can imagine what Amelia Bedelia might have done in later books when she was instructed to “hit the road”, “pitch the tent”, or to “bake a sponge cake”.

Maybe I was drawn to the books because I share a last name with Amelia Bedelia’s employers. More likely, it is because I also desire to please but tend to take things more literally than intended. Let me clarify that the following stories happened when I was a child. When taking an eye exam, the doctor had me read a line of letters projected on the wall. I did. Then he told me to do it backwards. My dad tells me that I looked at the doctor like he was crazy. Then I spun my chair around to face the opposite wall. Obedient, but clueless. Another time my dad gave me and my sisters the job of painting the porch while he was at work. When he got called to the office for a phone call, we were on the other line asking him what we should do to patch the puncture hole in the paint can. He thought quickly and told us to chew some gum and press it into the hole. Then he asked how the paint can got a hole. I explained that the instructions he left said to mix the paint by rolling the can around the house. My sisters assumed that he meant to gently roll it around on the living room floor. But the directions specifically said, “around the house”. So I pushed the can around the outside of the house, where it was punctured by a sharp rock. Strick adherence. Complete lack of understanding. Obedient to his instructions but blind to his will.

How can we mess things up so bad when we are careful to do everything on the list? Because we don’t follow a checklist God. To fully obey the instructions requires some understanding of the will of the one who gave the instructions. We can mess things up terribly while being strictly obedient, precise, enthusiastic, certain, and eager to please. You can diligently do everything on the list and still not please the one who gave you the list. This is not a failure to do the action that is commanded but a failure to know the heart of the one who gave the command.

In the 4th woe of Matthew 23, Jesus confronts the scribes and pharisees as spiritual Amelia Bedelias minus the innocence and desire to please.

Matthew 23:23-24

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

They were obedient. But it was a hypocritical obedience. They were ***strict with particulars and blind to principles***. They were hyper attentive to the specifics of obedience but ignorant of the Spirit of obedience.

The point of this message is simple. We want to please God! We are exploring the denunciation of hypocritical obedience in a pursuit of true obedience. True obedience requires intimacy with God. Intimacy with God acquaints us with the principles of his character. The particulars of obedience flow from the higher principles of obedience. Obedience in both is possible but you will never have true obedience in the particular without the principle. We need more than determination to do God's will, we need discernment from him and dependance on him.

Obedience has a bad reputation, but it is a beautiful thing. Jesus denounced hypocritical obedience because he loves true obedience. Here is a brief sample of Bible truth that values the sacredness of obedience.

Obedience and disobedience frame the entire narrative of redemption.

Romans 5:19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Obedience keeps us on a firm foundation.

Matthew 7:24 Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The spirit of obedience is love.

John 14:15 If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

John 15:10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

John 15:14 You are my friends if you do what I command you.

1 John 2:5 Whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

Obedience brings blessing.

Genesis 22:18 In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.

Obedience is better than sacrifice.

1 Samuel 15:22 And Samuel said, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams."

The Bible leaves us with no ambiguity to debate if obedience to God is expected. When God commands, we are to obey. The question that does linger is "what is God calling us to do?" The Bible is not perfectly clear on every point and hearing God's voice is not a simplistic exercise. There is a range of interpretations for Biblical commands. There are legitimate questions, not only on how to apply certain Biblical commands but also on if they apply to us at all. There are lists of commandments, but the Bible is not simply one big list. We must be humble and discerning to know what pleases God. But one point is clear, when we become aware of God's command, obedience is always the most appropriate and most beautiful thing we could do. Obedience is a given. What obedience looks like is not. We must acknowledge from the outset that obedience takes discernment and humility and is not an exact science.

The religious leaders didn't engage in this struggle of discerning the heart of God. They stuck to the list and strictly followed it without concern for the Spirit behind the list. They didn't fail to obey. They obeyed hypocritically because they were blind to the principles.

Verses 16-22 are a preamble to the 4th woe. Here Jesus doesn't call them "hypocrites" but "blind guides". Hypocritical obedience is strict with particulars but blind to principles. There is some element of blindness to hypocritical obedience. The diagnosis of blindness appears 4 times in verses 16, 17, 19, and 24. They are not seeing the heart of God.

There is a solid Biblical link between spiritual blindness and disobedience. The religious leaders were confident they were a guide to the blind, but they were acting disobediently (Romans 19, 21-23). For my child self, Amelia Bedelia, and the religious leaders, it was not primarily a condition of being bad but being blind. On the path to obedience, we must replace blindness with discernment.

I have divided Christ's teaching in this text into three actions of discernment to pursue.

1. Distinguish principles from particulars.
2. Distinguish man-made particulars from God-given particulars.
3. Prioritize the principles. Eliminate nonessentials.

Distinguish principles from particulars.

Throughout the passage Jesus points out the failure to assess degrees of importance. They failed to see that the temple is greater than the gold and that the altar is greater than the gift. In fact, it was the temple that made the gold sacred and the altar that made the gift sacred. He refers to the principles that had been neglected as "weightier matters of the law". Do you hear what Jesus is saying? He is teaching that not every part of the law has the same importance. Then he chooses extreme examples. A gnat and a camel, to illustrate how much more important the principles are than the particulars. The principles are the weightier matters of the law. Swallowing the camel illustrates neglecting the principles. As the temple makes the gold sacred, the particular is only sacred when it is motivated by the principle. Jesus is the one who established a distinction between principles and particulars. It takes spiritual discernment for us to see that distinction.

Tithing herbs was on the extreme end of small. You can't make a meal out of herbs. You will never see scrambled mint as a main entree. You don't get a full serving out of fried cumin. You just don't eat spoonfuls of boiled dill. Herbs are garnishes for the meal, not the meal. They don't come in cans or bottles but in shakers. I looked up dried mint on Amazon to see how much it weighs. A bulk 10-pound package is shipped in the following dimensions: 10.7 inches x 9.3 inches x 3.8 inchesⁱⁱ. I calculated the pounds per square inch and learned that 100 pounds of mint would fill a 3' by 3' by 3' box. If you put rice into that same box, it would weigh 1000 pounds. No 1st century Jewish family was producing that much mint. The tithe they gave would have been given in tiny containers that would be about as likely to be received a tithe as they were to get lost on the way to give them. Herbs are light. Tithing mint is an extreme example of a particular.

Jesus did not denounce them for tithing on herbs but for being distracted from the principles by their microscopic focus on the particulars.

Jesus refers to the gnat and the camel hyperbolically to contrast the infinitely small with the infinitely big. Camel is unclean meat (Leviticus 11:4). But if uncleanness was Jesus' only point, he could have accused them of swallowing a pig. He chose the camel because it is huge. The camels native to Israel are dromedary camels. This is the tallest species of camel. And adult males can reach nearly 8 feet tall and weigh up to 800 pounds. They are the moose of the desert. Swallowing a camel is a picture of impossibility.

Gnats, like herbs, are on the extreme small end of the spectrum. Do you know that you eat bugs? The internet is sprinkled with conflicting statistics about the number of insects we ingest in our food and swallow during the act of breathing. Some sources say that you could eat up to 2 pounds of insects a year. There is a Biblical prohibition for eating four-footed winged insects (Leviticus 11:20,23). The examples of edible winged insects include crickets and grasshoppers (Leviticus 11:22). You don't need a strainer to filter out these. You can pick these up between your fingers. They would crunch when you bit them. A gnat, like herbs, is a restriction far more particular than the law required.

There is a difference between principles and particulars and Jesus is suggesting that this difference can be extremely large. He is not teaching that the small things don't matter but that they only matter when they flow from the weightier principles. Our task is to discern the principle in every particular and ensure that they align.

What is the principle behind your health choices? What is the principle behind your entertainment choices? What is the principle behind your church attendance?

We are nudged in the direction of healthy obedience when we ask, "What is the principle behind this?" The condition of hypocritical obedience is blindness to principles. So we need to seek God for a vision of these principles. Asking this question can be eye opening and surprising. For example, what do you suppose the principle of tithing on garden produce is? I would expect you to say, "stewardship". I would not expect you to say, "hospitality." Check this out...

Deuteronomy 12:17-19

You may not eat within your towns the tithe of your grain or of your wine or of your oil, or the firstborn of your herd or of your flock, or any of your vow offerings that you vow, or your freewill offerings or the contribution that you present, but you shall eat them before the Lord your God in the place that the Lord your God will choose, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, and the Levite who is within your towns. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all that you undertake. Take care that you do not neglect the Levite as long as you live in your land.

They were to eat the produce they tithed. They were to invite the Levites and make it a grand celebration. There is big difference between the particular of sending off 5 grams of mint to the temple and the principle of generous hospitality. The principles include those that Jesus mentioned, justice, mercy and faithfulness. We can get so granular in our efforts to safeguard obedience that we miss the point. Those flakes of mint could be nothing but a legalistic particular or they could be the spice that turns a meal into a community building celebration.

So what are these "weightier matters of the law"? The examples given are, "justice, mercy, and faithfulness". This trilogy appears nowhere else in scripture. The closest parallel is list of virtues that Micah tells us God requires of us, "to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly" (Micah 6:8). The fact that Biblical virtue lists are not formatted identically suggests that the weightier matters are not a checklist. They are the attributes of God. They are impossible to list exhaustively. Here are some Biblical virtue lists that give us a sense of these weightier matters.

Jesus (Matthew 22:36-40): When asked, "what is the greatest commandment in the law?" (a question that acknowledges the degrees of importance within the law), Jesus listed:

- Love for God
- Love for others

Paul (1 Corinthians 13): Tells us what virtues remain.

- Faith
- Hope

- Love

Paul (Galatians 5): Tells us what fruits (virtues/principles) the Spirit produces in us.

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness
- Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-Control

Solomon narrowed it down to 1 when he told us that wisdom is the principal thing (Proverbs 4:7).

James expanded wisdom into multiple virtues when he described wisdom as being “pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere (James 3:17).

Peter calls us to “make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.” (2 Peter 1:5-7).

Virtue lists didn't stop with the Bible writers. Theologians have popularized The 7 Capitol Virtues that are the opposite of The 7 Deadly Sins (aren't all sins deadly?). In the 4th century the theologian Ambrose asserted that there are 4 Cardinal Virtues, “temperance, justice, prudence, and fortitude”. Philosophers, theologians, self-help authors, interior designers, and Instagram influencers keep pumping out lists. Which list do you follow? Just when you think you have it figured out, a best-selling author will publish a new list of 9 rules of life. Don't follow any list. Follow Jesus. The weightier matters of the law are the principles, the Spirit of the law, the very character of God. To truly know the weightier matters requires that we know God.

A first step in obedience is to distinguish between the principle and the particular. I heard a true story of a church with a strange tradition. For generations, every time someone would approach the podium to address the church they would bow toward the podium before taking the stage. Someone challenged the tradition. The church defended the tradition. But in their defense, they realized they all assumed different reasons. One said it was to show humility. Another always considered it a sign of respect for the role of church leadership. Another thought it was an act of seeking the blessing of God over their part in the service. They decided to learn the original principle behind the practice. Interviewing the oldest members they eventually learned the origin of the traditional bow. In the early days of the church the steeple bell was not installed in the steeple. It hung down low in front of the podium. The only way to access the podium was to duck under the bell. They were strict to the particular and blind to the principle. Become a detective and track down the principle behind the particular practice.

The particular is not purchasing gas on Sabbath. The principle is resting in Jesus.

The particular is giving tithes and offerings. The principle is faithfulness.

The particular is saying a prayer before a meal. The principle is constant connection with God.

The particular is putting filters on the internet. The principle is desiring purity.

Blindness to the principle, invalidates the particular.

The particular is opposing a prochoice politician. The principle of the sanctity of life is violated when you treat people like they don't matter.

The particular is not letting cheese touch your lips. The principle of whole person wellness is violated when you fail to get adequate sleep.

The particular is screening your child's entertainments for bad language and violence. The principle is violated when you speak in a harsh and demeaning way to your spouse in front of your child.

Distinguish the principle from the particular. Like a curious child asks, "Why?" until you get an answer that makes sense. If you are blind to the principle, ask God to open your eyes so that you can make the distinction.

Distinguish man-made particulars from God-given particulars.

Often, strict obedience to particulars is a red flag that warns us of a spiritually imbalanced person. But be careful. Not every particular is bad. Strict obedience is not always hypocritical. This text highlights both man-made and God-given particulars. This is not an exact science. We will never draw perfect lines of distinction, but true obedience will make an effort to know which is which.

Jesus gives us two examples of man-made particulars, both having to do with swearing oaths.

Verse 16 Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath."

Verse 18 And you say, "If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath."

This is what they said. It is not what God says. These are not quotes or paraphrases from the Old Testament but human inventions.

Jesus was not denouncing oaths but the way they were swearing oaths. Jesus and James both tell us not to swear at all (Matthew 5:33-37, James 5:12). In both cases, they focus on what we invoke when we swear an oath. Consistent with Jesus' point in verses 20-22, all things that we can swear by are God's things and therefore when we invoke something in an oath we are swearing by God. This doesn't mean we should not make promises but that we should make them with a simple "yes", knowing that God is always our witness.

The Old Testament's concern about oaths is not that we don't make them but that we keep the oaths we make (Ecclesiastes 5:1-5, Proverbs 20:25). God wants us to make promises with integrity. The principle here is honesty.

Where oath taking became an act of hypocritical obedience is when they started making their own particulars. They made a distinction between binding vows and non-binding vows. When they wanted to make a promise but didn't want to keep it, they would swear by the temple or the altar. They invented a spiritual justification for lying. There are some particulars that are invented in our own hypocrisy.

Other particulars are given by God. He is particular, organized, and detailed. Highly technical religion may be a red flag or it may be healthy obedience. Jesus gives the example of tithing as a God-given particular. Certainly, they took it further than required. There is a command to tithe on produce (Leviticus 27:30, Deuteronomy 12:17-19; 14:22). The examples given in relation to this command are "wine, grain and oil". (Deuteronomy 14:23). They took it further to mint, dill and cumin. They went from fruits and vegetables to herbs and spices. Still Jesus says, "These you ought to have done." He affirms them in their strict tithing practice.

Don't reject all strict forms of religion as legalistic. It is not the level of detail that makes it right or wrong but whether or not that particular is given by God. It is not a checklist. Discernment is hard and messy but necessary.

Prioritize the principles. Eliminate nonessentials.

Distinguishing principles from particulars and those particulars that are man-made from those that are God-given is not a simple process. When we do have clarity about these distinctions, what do we do with them? ***We prioritize the principles and eliminate the non-essentials.*** We do the work of discerning weights so that we can keep the main thing the main thing. Distraction is a topic that I am currently studying. It sounds weird to say that I am focusing on distraction, but I am.

Here is a list of books I have listened to and relistened to that have confirmed in me the conviction that distraction is the new epidemic and focus is the new superpower: Deep Work by Cal Newport, Stolen Focus by Johann Hari, Discipline is Destiny by Ryan Holiday, Essentialism by Greg McKeown, Golden by Justin Zorn and Leigh Marz, and The Comfort Crisis by Michael Easter. They have all written about the loss of focus because we are all experiencing it at increasing and destructive rates.

Noise and information bombard us through dinging notifications, newsfeeds, screens, opportunities, and earbuds. Our lives are so heavily taxed with input and output that we never just stay put. We suffer from a global ADD.

Here are some teachings from the book Essentialism that have sunk deep into me:

- Essentialists are continually separating the vital few from the trivial many.
 - A mantra of the essentialist is "less but better".
 - If I don't prioritize my life, someone else will.
 - If you don't establish a singular priority you will settle for multiple less important things.
- Priority entered the English language 500 years ago as a singular word, meaning the first or prior thing. It was only in the high pace of the 20th century that we made the word plural. Many of us have believed the lie that we can call everything a top priority and still make them a priority.

Does your life testify that distraction is a problem? Do you struggle to keep the main thing the main thing?

Here is the problem, distraction destroys depth (a 3D truth). Greg McKeown describes the nonessentialist as making a millimeter of progress in a million directions. Society has pushed us to go wide but this limits our ability to go deep. People used to read for hours. You are likely antsy because this study has taken you more than 25 minutes. Distraction is the enemy of depth. And that is a problem because our God is deep. His ways are high. Consider what an epidemic of distraction does to spirituality. It makes us superficial. It keeps us from accessing the weightier matters of the law. To prioritize the principles is to go to battle the force of society, o seek after the heart of God in a world that pulls you away from depth and to have a singular focus for God in a world fighting for your attention. To prioritize the principles is not as simple as making a list. We then must live that list in a world of flashing particulars.

A friend asked me if I know of any morally conscious portfolios to invest in for retirement. The accounts that his money was in included companies like Budweiser and pharmaceutical companies that he did not want to support. I had never thought about it. I don't know what companies are contributing to the growth of my retirement account. Upon reflection, I agreed that it would be good

to choose investments that aligned with your morals. It is a fairly granular particular but one of those particulars to which Jesus would say, “you should have done the later.” I could consider it a God-given particular. But I didn’t feel motivation to track down my retirement accounts and find out what companies I was associated with. Should I feel bad that I am not doing the good thing that someone else is doing? Our text supports the idea that there are good things that God has not led us all to. Securing a morally agreeable retirement portfolio is good if it can be done without neglecting the weightier matters. I just about panic when I think of getting that granular. If I went to that level on everything it would distract me from the weightier matters. It must flow from the principle. I would start dropping stuff. At my life stage and spiritual development, to fulfill that level of particulars would almost certainly pull me away from more important things. This is a tool to help us assess if a particular is right for us. Ask, “Can I do this good thing without neglecting the more important principles behind it?” If we let it, obedience could keep us distracted from the best things God has called us to.

The spiritual equivalent to doom scrolling through cat videos is tithing mint, dill, and cumin. It is not an issue of being bad but being blind. The student with ADD is not disobeying out of naughtiness but out of distraction. It is not a legalistic problem. It is a distraction problem. We get pulled into particulars and neglect principles because our distraction makes us blind to the principles.

What principles do you need to prioritize? What nonessentials do you need to eliminate?

Remember Amelia Bedelia. In all her books she messes everything up. Then somehow makes it ok in the end. In one of them, after messing everything up she serves a delicious cake. Mr. Rogers asks, “Amelia Bedelia, how do you do it?” She replies, ironically, “I guess I just know your ways.” The woman who had no awareness of their intentions concluded that she was an expert in knowing their desires. The key to obedience is to know God’s ways. Not to deceive ourselves that we know them, but to know them at a level that we do not neglect the weightier matters and that every particular flows clearly from a sacred principle.

ⁱ Amelia Bedelia, by Peggy Parish, 1963. 11992 I Can Read version, pages 16-20.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.amazon.com/Dried-Mint-Leaves-Its-Delish/dp/B00XCA2FLM>