

Does Jesus want mercy or sacrifice?

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BIG SANDY, Texas—While Jesus was sitting in a house eating one day, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with Him (Matthew 9:10). Jesus' disciples also came.

When the Pharisees saw Jesus eating with the sinners, they approached His disciples and asked about it (verse 11). They asked: "Why does your Master eat with publicans and sinners?"

Piece of advice

When Jesus heard that, He gave an answer. A portion of Jesus' answer is intriguing.

Jesus said: "Go and learn what this means: 'I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.' "

I suppose some Pharisees were there who simply did not understand what He said. But I imagine there were other Pharisees there who understood what He said but they chose not to acknowledge His words as truth.

What about you? Do you understand what Jesus said?

Do you understand the difference between mercy and sacrifice? Do you understand the reason Jesus viewed mercy as more important than sacrifice?

One the best rules for understanding Scripture is to study it in its context. Consider some of the other things Jesus said to the Pharisees during that discussion.

■ Jesus said that people who are whole do not need a physician, but people who are sick need a physician.

■ Jesus said He did not come to call the righteous but to call sinners to repentance.

Condemning the innocent

A short time later Jesus was walking through a field on the Sabbath day (Matthew 12:1). His disciples were hungry, so they began picking some grain.

When the Pharisees saw what was happening they accused the disciples of doing something that was not "lawful" on the Sabbath (verse 2).

When Jesus answered them, He first mentioned an example about King David from the Old Testament (verses 3-6)

Next He talked about the concept He had mentioned earlier to them. Notice what He said about mercy and sacrifice:

"If you had known what this means, 'I will have mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent [disciples]" (verse 7).

Did you catch that? The previous piece of advice was so powerful that it could have helped the Pharisees avoid a major mistake in their treatment of people.

We don't know if the Pharisees originally tried to follow the advice and then backslid, or if they never even tried following the advice. But we do know that their failure to follow the advice influenced them to sin.

Too bad they hadn't learned what that phrase meant.

What about us?

Are we willing to learn from the mistakes of the Pharisees?

Don't you think Jesus wants us to learn what His words meant? Don't you think Jesus wants us to learn about the superiority of mercy over sacrifice?

In the final analysis, we know Jesus is right. If we understand that He prefers mercy and not sacrifice, we will be less likely to condemn innocent people.

Come to think of it, we will be less likely to condemn guilty people too.