

“Choosing the Right Model”
Luke 20:45-21:4
October 23, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

There are two events in our passage this morning, and they are connected for the purpose of contrast. In the first, Jesus warns his disciples about the hypocrisy of the scribes. It’s hard for us to imagine this today, but religious leaders like these scribes were the rock star celebrities of their day. The Jews were very serious about their religion, and scribes were the experts in the study of the law of Moses. They not only studied the law, but taught it as well, gathering around them bands of students in order to instruct them in the law. Whenever someone attains celebrity status in a culture, certain advantages come to that person. In our own culture, for example, we ask celebrities for their autograph. We value the mere signing of a name when penned directly by the celebrity. We don’t expect them to wait in line with non-celebrities but allow them to go the front of the line. We defer to them in numerous ways such as giving their opinions higher value than the opinions of others. “If Michael Jordan wears Hanes underwear, then maybe I should too.” Jesus notes how the scribes were attracted to the external trappings of their celebrity status, while at the same time being guilty of the worst kind of sin and cruelty. They devoured widow’s houses, a needy group given special attention in Israel.

In the second event, Jesus notices someone on the extreme opposite end of the social scale from the scribes. Where they were the celebrities of their day, poor widows were the invisible people of their day. Not all widows were poor, but this one was. Others may not have taken notice of her, but Jesus did. Observing her putting in two very small coins in the temple treasury, he commends her for her generosity.

Luke puts these two events together because he means for us to see the contrast between them. We need to see this contrast because we need to be faced with the question of which one we admire. Do we admire the one Jesus admires, or the one Jesus condemns? I’m not asking which one we know we should admire, but which one we want to be like in our hearts. Which one would you want your children to be like? This is a very important question, for the simple reason that we become like those we admire. In his book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, philosopher James Smith makes the point that our formation is determined more by what we love and admire than by the information we acquire. Admiration, not information, is decisive.

So which one does your heart really want to be like, the hypocritical celebrities or the invisible widow who trusts God? Most of us want a third option. Maybe we don’t need to be celebrities like these scribes, but we do want

a measure of success, only without the hypocrisy present in the scribes. Or to see it from the widow's side, we would like to be a rich widow who also gives generously to the Lord. Luke doesn't provide us with such options for the simple reason that we will never learn to trust God by keeping a foot in both worlds. Unless we are willing to lose all in order to follow Christ, we won't learn what it means to trust him. The very problem of the scribes is that they wanted to keep a foot in both worlds. They wanted a relationship with God while also being in control of their own lives. Let's look at three contrasts between these two in order to grow in our admiration for this widow and her faith in God, that we might learn to want to be like her.

I. Looking Good versus Being Good

The scribes were the celebrities of their day and had become addicted to the honors given to celebrities. They liked being the best-dressed people around, with their long, impressive-looking robes. Very few could afford such robes, with the result that those who had them stood out from the crowd as something special. They loved the honorific greetings extended to them in the marketplaces, the ancient version of asking someone for his autograph. They loved sitting in the VIP section of the synagogue, where they could bask in the glow of feeling themselves better and more important than the others present. They also loved the way they were always escorted to the place of honor at banquets, a place next to the host. It was especially sweet when they arrived late and someone had to be moved in order to allow them to assume that place of honor.

In our day, these kinds of privileges are not so much conferred by society as they are purchased with money. So the air traveler can fly first class, be the first seated on the plane and look down on all those poor souls as they shuffle past you into their coach seats. With enough money, you can buy the best seats at the football game and the concert. It is money that can acquire the impressive clothes and car. Is it sinful to have a fifty-yard line skybox seat at the football game or to buy a first class plane ticket? No, it's not that simple. The point is that they loved these things in order to feel superior to others. Notice that they liked to "walk around" in long robes. In that way, more people would see them. It's not very satisfying to dress nicely when no one sees you. The whole point is to be seen by others. C. S. Lewis helps us understand this passage in a well-known quote from *Mere Christianity*. "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man." The whole point of wanting to look good is to feel oneself better than others.

The scribes valued looking good over being good. Jesus said that they "**devour widows' houses.**" It's not quite clear how they did this. Scribes were forbidden from taking money for teaching, but they were not forbidden from receiving the hospitality of others. It's possible that they took advantage of this

and manipulated widows into caring for them beyond the widow's ability to do so. There are other possibilities too for how they did this, but it doesn't really matter. The point is that in spite of their impressive looks, they failed to be good at a point that Judaism was quite clear. There was wide agreement in Judaism of this day that caring for widows was a sacred task.

The widow, on the other hand, though she did not have the impressive appearance of the scribes, was the one who was truly good. Jesus said of her gift of two small coins that she put into the temple treasury more than others giving larger sums.

II. Power versus Weakness

The scribes had power and the poor widow did not. The scribes had the kind of power to be granted the best seats in the synagogue and the feasts. Their claim to these seats went unchallenged because they had power. The widow, on the other hand, is a picture of weakness. She had only two small copper coins. These coins, called *lepta*, were the smallest coins in this currency. She may have been put in a quandary by Jewish law of this day, which forbade the giving of only one coin. Two was the minimum, but two was also all she had. But she gave it, making herself completely powerless to provide for herself.

God is challenging us in this contrast between power and weakness with the whole area of control in our lives. The scribes were in control, while the widow was completely out of control. One of the reasons money has such a hold on our souls is that it promises us power and control over our lives. So when the widow gave up her money, she was giving up control. And when the scribes devoured widows' houses for their own gain, they were grasping for more power.

Before we can admire the poor widow like Jesus does, we will have to change our view of power. What are some of the ways we seek power and control in our lives? One of the ways I seek it is that I want to be right, and I want to be seen as right. So when my wife challenges me on something, my kneejerk reaction is to become defensive. The amazing thing about this is that it happens on such unimportant issues. If she politely asks me to clean up the breadcrumbs I leave on the counter after making a sandwich, I can react in my heart as if she has drawn a sword and is about to attack me. All the defenses go up, and I find myself thinking about a counter-attack. "Well you often leave a mess in the kitchen too." I am simply seeking the power of being right. Another way I seek power is by wanting everything to be well-ordered and predictable in my life. I want to be in control of my schedule and have things happen in the way I want them to happen. A key indicator of this is when I find

myself getting angry when others don't cooperate with my agenda. Or I seek power by simply wanting to have answers to the questions people ask me.

When we follow Christ, our view of power changes. It does so because we learn to trust God and his control of our lives. That brings us to our next point.

III. Unbelief versus Faith

We see the unbelief of the scribes in their effort to look good and have power. The whole reason they want to look good and be in control is that they don't trust that they have any of these things through God. Unbelief says that if anything good is going to happen to me, I will have to do it myself. It is a radical self-trust, and it is this self-trust that fuels their desire to look good and have power. I was listening this week to the old Frank Sinatra classic "My Way." It struck me as I listened to the words of the song that it could be the theme song of hell because it so strongly expresses this idea of self trust. "And now, the end is here, and so I face the final curtain. My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case, of which I'm certain. I've lived a life that's full; I traveled each and every highway. And more, much more than this, I did it my way." And then the final stanza says, "For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught. To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels. The record shows I took the blows and did it my way."

The poor widow provides a contrast to their unbelief. When she gave her last two coins, she emptied herself of all power and resources because she trusted that God would provide for her. She now had no ability to provide for necessities such as her food. I find it easier to trust God when I have no choice, when I have no resources of my own. Jesus is saying to us here that it is better to have nothing and trust him than to have everything and not trust him. The reason is that Jesus is the greatest treasure possible.

What exactly is Jesus asking of us here? Is he requiring that we sweep clean our bank accounts and give everything away like her? Yes and no. We are required to lose everything to follow Jesus in the sense of no longer placing our trust in anything or anyone outside of him. But God has placed upon us certain obligations. I am obligated by God to work in order to provide for my family. As God supplies, I am to provide for my needs and my wife's needs so that others won't have to when we grow too old or too feeble to keep working. The obligation Jesus places upon us here through the example of the widow is to trust God instead of money.

Let me mention a couple of specific applications. First, we are to trust God instead of going into debt. Chronic debt is a symptom of not trusting in God. It usually happens like this. We have either a need or desire, but lack the funds to take care of it. Without thinking, we simply whip out the credit card and

charge it. What we miss in doing this is the opportunity to trust God. If you have a need for which you lack the money, I would encourage you, if at all possible, to delay the purchase and pray for God's provision. When we quickly pull out the credit card, we deprive ourselves of an opportunity to trust God. A second application is to follow through on what the Bible says and make giving to God your first fruits giving. Give to God off the top instead of from what is left after all your needs have been met. Proverbs 3:9 says, **"Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce."** The practice urged here is to give to God first and then to trust him to meet your needs with whatever is left. If we do it the other way, give to God only after we have made sure that our needs are met, we have missed the joy of trusting God and seeing him provide.

CONCLUSION:

So which one do you admire, the celebrity scribes or the poor widow? I think we often pity the widow and feel bad for her. I'm confident she didn't feel bad for herself, simply because there are never any regrets when we trust the Lord. She may not have known it at the time, but she was following Jesus in her giving of all. Even in this passage, we can see some of Jesus' willingness to lose it all. In verse 45 we read that he spoke this warning about the scribes **"in the hearing of all the people."** Why would Jesus do that? Was he just being mean-spirited and wanting to rebuke the scribes publicly? I don't think so. He was making them look bad in public, the thing they most feared, in order to shake them up and bring them to repentance. Jesus did so knowing that he was taking a huge risk. They would either repent or they would grow so angry at him that they would kill him. As we all know, they did the latter. But Jesus did not withhold himself, but gave it all.

Do you remember the Hans Christian Andersen story, *The Emperor's New Clothes*? The vain king hires two weavers to make him a new suit. The dishonest tailors claim that they can make him the most amazing suit of clothes ever, made of a special fabric that will be invisible to all those who are unfit for their positions or just stupid. When they claim the suit is done, they bring it to the king, and since there's nothing there, he can't see it. But he doesn't want to admit that fact because he will in his own mind be admitting to being unfit for his position. The tailors go through the motions of dressing the king in his new suit, and then leading him on a royal procession through the streets of his kingdom. Everyone pretends they can see the suit and are complimenting the king on how well it looks until a little boy, unaware of the claims about the fabric, blurts out that the king is wearing nothing at all.

In a similar way, it is the widow in our story who, like the little boy, sees things as they really are. God really is trustworthy. May God help you to see that and to admire her and be like her, trusting God for all things!