

Luke 20:45-21:4
The Widow's Gift

Last time we spoke of the importance of having right thinking about the person of Jesus Christ. We are reminded that we need to affirm the true Christian doctrine that Jesus is fully God and fully man. This is not important simply as an academic exercise, though that is, I believe, part of working out our salvation. Nor is it important for the assurance that our faith is true saving faith, though that also is true. It is important because false teachers abound, and if we do not possess an intelligent and defensible understanding of what we do believe, we can be persuaded by clever and eloquent speakers to believe something else.

False teachers are not a new thing. There have always been those who, either from misunderstanding themselves, or more often from a deliberate desire to gain some advantage, have misrepresented true faith. Scripture speaks of them often, and with emphasis.

“¹If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ²and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ ³you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 13:1-3).

“¹³Moreover, among the prophets of Samaria I saw an offensive thing:
They prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray.

¹⁴Also among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing:
The committing of adultery and walking in falsehood;
And they strengthen the hands of evildoers,
So that no one has turned back from his wickedness.
All of them have become to Me like Sodom,
And her inhabitants like Gomorrah.

¹⁵Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets,
‘Behold, I am going to feed them wormwood
And make them drink poisonous water,
For from the prophets of Jerusalem
Pollution has gone forth into all the land.’”

¹⁶Thus says the Lord of hosts,
‘do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you.
They are leading you into futility;
They speak a vision of their own imagination,
Not from the mouth of the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:13-16).

“¹Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, ²‘son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who prophesy, and say to those who prophesy from their own inspiration, “listen to the word of the Lord! ³Thus says the Lord God, ‘woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing. ⁴O Israel, your prophets have been like foxes

among ruins. ⁵You have not gone up into the breaches, nor did you build the wall around the house of Israel to stand in the battle on the day of the Lord. ⁶They see falsehood and lying divination who are saying, 'The Lord declares,' when the Lord has not sent them; yet they hope for the fulfillment of their word. ⁷Did you not see a false vision and speak a lying divination when you said, 'the Lord declares,' but it is not I who have spoken?"

⁸Therefore, thus says the Lord God, "because you have spoken falsehood and seen a lie, therefore behold, I am against you," declares the Lord God. ⁹"So My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will have no place in the council of My people, nor will they be written down in the register of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel, that you may know that I am the Lord God (Ezekiel 13:1-9).

The New Testament continued this charge against false prophets. Jesus warned His disciples to "beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15). Paul insisted ²⁹"I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). The apostle John remained his hearers that "children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18). Peter told his readers that ¹false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. ²Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; ³and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep" (2 Peter 2:1-3). And Jude wrote that "certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (Jude 4).

Clearly there are false teachers who seek to undermine the truth of God's perfect revelation by offering a version of truth that is not true. In Jesus' case, it was a combination of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians who had combined their forces to undermine His authority. In challenging Jesus before the crowds, they had sought to embarrass Him and remove from Him the support of the masses. They had failed. Instead, they had been, themselves, embarrassed. Jesus had explained that He was David's Son and Lord and the true Messiah of whom they had all waited. But knowing they were unwilling to believe, Jesus prevailed one last time upon His disciples to instruct them on the importance of challenging false religion.

The Warning

Jesus now turned His attention from the crowds to His disciples, "while all the people were listening, He said to the disciples" (v. 45). Jesus moved from doctrine to practice. It is important to note that He did not try to find common ground with the false teachers, but rather He challenged them directly and left no room for compromise. In fact, in Matthew's narrative, Jesus singled out the Pharisees by name.

In our gospel of Luke, Jesus addressed His disciples about those who had previously attacked Him,

His caution was clear, “⁴⁶beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, ⁴⁷who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation” (v. 46-47). This was not a new teaching. Jesus had often called out the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy and identified them as a threat to true faith.

“⁴²But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithes of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. ⁴³Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places. ⁴⁴Woe to you! For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it” (Luke 11:42-44).

It was a reminder of Psalm 1,

“¹How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,

Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

²But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night.

³He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season

And its leaf does not wither;

And in whatever he does, he prospers.

⁴The wicked are not so,

But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.

⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

⁶For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish” (Psalm 1:1-6).

We can pause to reflect on the specific offenses which characterized these false teachers. We can recognize in them the marks of false teachers throughout the ages and even today. First, they “like to walk around in long robes” (v. 46). That is they dressed like kings or priests about to perform some ritual sacrifice. All Israelites had added tassels to their outer garments as a reminder of the commandments God had given. Jesus wore such attire. However, the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day had lengthened them in a deliberate display of religiosity. That was their sin. Their use of the robes and tassels was not its original intent to remind them of the commandments they were compelled to obey, but rather simply an opportunity to show off how religious and holy they were.

Second, they “love respectful greetings in the marketplaces” (v. 46). Again, this was not merely a common greeting that anyone might give or receive. It was, instead, a call of respect from all they passed along their way. They expected everyone to acknowledge them and their position. The Mishnah taught that it was worse to disregard the words of a scribe than the Torah itself. Such was their self-righteousness.

Third, they insisted upon “chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets” (v. 46). These were the seats in front of the raised platform on which the prayer leader or scripture reader stood. Again the point was to elevate themselves in the sight of man. To the scribes and Pharisees, the attention *of* man was more important than the attention *to* God. All of these reek of the taste of celebrity against which James warned the early Church and against which we must be on our guard even today, “²for if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, ‘you sit here in a good place,’ and you say to the poor man, ‘you stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,’ ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?” (James 2:2-4).

But their sin was even more sinister. They also “devour widows’ houses” (v. 47). This could mean either that they asked widows to contribute more than they knew they could afford, or that in handling the estates of new widows they took advantage of their position and took more of a commission than was fair. In either case, they used their position for personal gain, not as a service to those whom they were supposed to protect.

Luke is especially graphic in his description here. The word he used for ‘devour’ is *katesthiō*. That word means to literally eat up completely like an animal. Widows were particularly protected by Old Testament law. “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan” (Exodus 22:22) is only one example of many. Finally, Jesus returned to the passion of these false teachers of the adulation of men. He concluded that they “for appearance’s sake offer long prayers” (v. 47). Again, they sought honor from men. They endeavored to show off their wisdom by speaking not to God, but for men in their prayers. Their attention, even in worship, was not where it should have been.

Such behavior was unacceptable. Jesus had addressed this specific issue previously, in offering His model for proper prayer to God, “⁵When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ⁶But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:5-6). Paul reminded his flock that he would never stoop to such behavior, “⁵for we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed - God is witness - ⁶nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority” (1 Thessalonians 2:5-6).

The Judgment

Jesus spared no words in condemning the self-righteousness of these false teachers. They ‘will receive greater condemnation’ (v.47) was all He said in conclusion. Greater than whom? Greater than other sinners one must conclude. Why? Because they had been given the advantages and opportunities to lead others in the faith. This is why their sin is greater. They had the greater responsibility.

Scripture speaks often of this. James states clearly, “let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). False teachers are described as “mute dogs” (Isaiah 56:10), “demented fools” (Hosea 9:7), “ravenous wolves” (Matthew 9:7), “blind

guides” (Matthew 15:14), “whitewashed tombs” (Matthew 23:27), “thieves and robbers” (John 10:8), “slaves of their own appetites” (Romans 16:18), “servants of Satan” (2 Corinthians 11:15), and “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3:18) to name only a few occurrences of their characterization in Scripture. No wonder the judgment upon them is severe, and all who take it upon themselves to bring forth God’s word today ought to take these words to heart.

For this is not intended for professionals only. There is no scriptural basis for limiting this expectation to those who have been through seminary or who are on the payroll of a church. A teacher, simply, is one who teaches. If one instructs their children, their spouse, their friend, their coworker in the word of God, the standard set before them is that they will do so with integrity and model a life that reflects the teaching they offer. No excuses will do in the last day.

The Counter Example

Then Jesus offered a counter example. He moved from hypocrisy to sincerity when “¹He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. ²And He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins. ³And He said, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; ⁴for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on” (v. 21:1-4).

Jesus must have been sitting near the temple treasury. This was located in the Court of the Women. Thirteen trumpet-shaped containers were set there to receive the offerings of the people. Many people passed by and dropped in their contribution. Some gave a little and others a great deal. As Mark wrote describing the same scene, “and He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums” (Mark 12:41).

Yet Jesus did not call the attention of the disciples to them. Instead, His attention is attracted to a woman who dropped in two small copper coins called *lepta*. This was a very small donation indeed. Though it is impossible to give accurate measure of biblical values of money. We can make some assessment of the actual monetary value of her gift. At the time of Jesus,

2 lepta = 1 quadrant

4 quadrants = 1 assarion

16 assarions = 1 denarius, the day’s wage for a common laborer

Assuming a day’s wage today for a common laborer at say \$12.00 per hour would be about \$100.00, then that would be the equivalent of a denarius. Therefore, 1 assarion would be worth $\frac{1}{16}$ of that or about \$6.25. A quadrant, then, was $\frac{1}{4}$ of that or about \$1.56. The two lepta were equal to the 1 quadrant, so in modern terms, the woman dropped into the receptacle about a dollar and a half. The lesson could be drawn that it is not the amount given that is important, but the amount left in the pocket of the giver that God sees.

The widow’s act was important enough of Jesus to call the attention of His disciples to it. She had given generously of her means. Scripture described her as poor, but the word used did not mean destitute, but rather someone who was simply needy. She had some money, and she gave it for the use of worship at her temple. That those who used that money were corrupt was not important. That she was being taken

advantage of was equally of no value. She gave as she felt she ought, and for that Jesus commended her as an example of right faith in contrast to the hypocritical false teachers of the scribes and Pharisees.

The system these men had created sucked the life out of its constituents, such as this poor widow. The commands of the law, enlarged and elaborated upon by the scribes had made faith a burden. Defenseless against them, the woman simply obeyed as she felt she must.

Takeaways

First, let us be constantly on the alert to make certain our religions is genuine and not ostentatious. We worship God for our sake, not those around us. Let us be blind to the attentions of others in worship. Let us read our Bible for what it can say to us and not for what we can say to others. May our time in God's Word be meaningful and applicable to our own fallen, sinful selves. And let our prayers be genuine, heartfelt, and deeply personal. May our prayer life never devolve into routine or ritual just to complete a task; just to be able to say "I have been praying of you."

Second, we can take away the fact that with all that was happening, and all that was about to happen, Jesus still noted the kind act of a poor widow. Scripture reminds us that no act is hidden from God.

"The eyes of the Lord are in every place,
Watching the evil and the good" (Proverbs 15:3).

"And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do (Hebrews 4:13).

It is not the actions of the great only that are noticed by Him. God is not seduced by celebrity. The acts, even the thoughts of each of us are known by Him.

Finally, we can be reminded that giving is an act of self-denial. It is an act of stewardship; an acknowledgement of what is ours and what is God's. For after all, nothing is ours and everything is God's. We need to remember that God's work does not depend on us; the act of giving is for our benefit not His. May we consider ways in which we can be generous, and may our generosity be steeped in right motives. I have yet to meet the person who was financially ruined because he was generous with his money for the right reasons.