

Part 73: Empty Praise and Powerful Provision

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October 29, 2023

A few years ago on a family road trip my wife and I thought it would be a fun idea to spend the night in Vegas with the kids. We were going to stay in the hotel Excalibur—which was marketed as a wonderful family hotel. It looks like a Disney castle, with charming features, a kid's pool, and within walking distance of some family friendly attractions. Things looked great on paper.

However, upon arrival to the hotel our already car weary kids had to endure the hour long check-in line. Once we got our room key, I opened it only to find out that it was already occupied (let the reader understand). After waiting in the long line again to get another room, we tried to pool only to find it overcrowded and our kids overstimulated by all that accompanied it. As we tried to find family friendly attractions we got lost in hotels, yelled at by security guards and after an overpriced "Hot Dog on a Stick" we returned to the room disheartened and dejected.

What we once thought was going to be the beacon of joy and hope, was undone right before our eyes.

If you were a Jew living in first century Israel your hope wouldn't have been in the Excalibur hotel, but it would have been represented in three specific places: the city of Jerusalem, the Jerusalem temple, and the religious leaders.

If you remember Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem it was these very establishments which opposed him as he descended into town. Jesus wept over a faithless Jerusalem, rebuked an empty temple, and encountered challenges from the murderous and scheming religious leaders.

And for the next three weeks, in reverse order that Jesus encountered them on his way into Jerusalem Jesus is going to predict the undoing of all three of those pillars of hope.

Why is Jesus doing this? He's doing it to show us the emptiness of Excalibur. He's showing us that there must be a better hope—a fuller hope—than what seemed to exist at the time. And what's unique about these next three weeks is that while he talks about the leaders, the temple and Jerusalem he's talking to his disciples. In other words, Jesus wants his disciples to live life in light of a better hope even in a temporarily broken world. He's giving us a Yelp review of all the places we tend to put our hope so that we can instead see the fullness of hope—not the temporary outcroppings of it.

Today as Jesus focuses on the scribes we are going to see this as our main point: **Jesus fills us for the joy of giving not of gaining**. Amidst the powerful religious leaders and the splendor of the temple Jesus calls our attention to a poor widow. This scandalous contrast reveals two truths for us this morning. First, we will see **The Danger of Being Seen by Men**, and then we will see **The Provision of Being Seen by Jesus**.

Luke begins by identifying for us the audience of Jesus words here: **Luke 20:45**, "And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples..."

So Luke would want us to hold in mind three groups of people who would have heard Jesus' message. Since Luke 19 Jesus has been in the temple teaching in the presence of man and now he begins to talk about the scribes, in the hearing of the people, and to the disciples.

Each of these groups would have heard Jesus' following words in different ways, all of which expose the dangers of seeking man's praise. Jesus says **(Luke 20:46-47)** "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

This is our first point today, **The Danger of Being Seen by Men**. And we are going to examine Jesus' words from the three perspectives of those who heard them.

Most pointedly this statement was **a rebuke of the scribes**. Jesus leans into his ongoing critique of the religious leaders by exposing what the scribes like, what they love, and what they'll get in the end.

There are times where we are affirmed when people claim to know our hearts. We don't mind being told that we like to eat healthy food, or that we love our family. But as good as that feels, we also know the paranoia and shame when people attach our affections to things we are more sensitive about or ashamed of.

Remember the first time someone on the school playground told their friends that you "liked" one of your classmates. That revelation, even if true, came with a sense of awkwardness and defensiveness—as if you knew how silly those affections were. Or what if someone said to you, "You really love being well thought of," or "You love buying nice things." It may be true, but when our affection is called out like that our first defense is to argue it or to feel ashamed of what we do love.

Well, Jesus with divine knowledge and perfect accuracy announced in public what their hearts whispered in private. The scribes liked and loved anything that added to their public perception. The word used for "like" in the Greek is one that is not merely casual, it's a willful and a volitional desire.

These scribes acted in a certain way wearing certain clothes so that they would be well received and well respected in every sphere. The center of their love was lavish greetings in the marketplace, the best seats in the Sabbath synagogue, and the place of honor at the feasts. In other words whether it was in the workplace, in the church, or in any sort of hospitality center these men cared about how they were treated—they wanted the best praise from people.

But Jesus revealed an even darker underbelly: they "devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers."

As a general rule during this time religious teachers were not to be paid for merely teaching. In order to get around that they would often charge for things like prayers. So what Jesus is probably referencing here is a predatory heart towards the most vulnerable. As we saw last week, no one would have more needs than a widow. So the scribes were happy to go and pray for them as often as the widows were willing to pay for them. Their prayers weren't motivated by the need but by greed.

In pointing this out Jesus makes a dangerous connection in our own hearts. If the center of our love is what we get from others, we will gladly do a lot to take that praise when it is freely offered. But we will also have no problem taking things that are not freely offered.

The praise of a widow was worth very little, but the money of a widow was worth something. They could use that money to buy more fancy clothes and boasting tassels which earned more respect from the people who they deemed as more significant and more valuable.

The punishment of their crime is that in correlation with the abundance of their praise in public, so too will be the abundance of their condemnation. **(Luke 20:47)** "They will receive the greater condemnation." If our primary hope is the commendation of man—we will be met with the condemnation of God.

There are far too many stories of Christian leaders who appear to be doing the Lord's work only to find that they were devouring others behind the scenes. But they will not go unpunished by the Lord. They will receive the greater condemnation. We should not forget this.

This incredibly stiff statement would have been of great shock to the crowds at this time. As modern readers of the gospel we have learned to expect the scribes to be the bad guys. But Jesus' statement here would have been just as shocking as a Netflix documentary suddenly dropping and exposing a beloved charity as a fraud and an abuser.

This achieves Jesus second purpose ***a warning to the crowds.***

We all need to be warned of the deceptive power of human praise and our own trust in it.

First, it warns us of who we look to. In the church, in politics, in our dating life, it doesn't matter how public their praise or how great their perception in the public square if they are defunct in matters of compassion and humility. Jesus warns us often in the book of Luke that if we look for power according to worldly standards, you'll find it in spades—but it's all bankrupt. It can't provide what you want it to. James warns us of this in **James 3:13-17**, "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but it is earthy, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere."

When it comes to elections, fiancés, pastors and podcasts be mindful and discerning of what they love most—and we can discern that by how they treat the vulnerable.

But also be warned of what you yourselves love. Jesus speaks of actions in this text, but it's actually a text about affections; what we long for, what we love, and what we hunger for.

Dung beetles are fascinating creatures. They spend a majority of their life collecting feces and rolling it into a ball. Part of what they do this for, believe it or not, is to present the ball of dung to potential mates in hopes that they may impress them. God's disciples are not called to be dung beetles. God is not impressed at a life lived to gather long robes, lengthy titles, rich acceptance and empty seats of honor.

When judgement day comes the rubbish you love will be of no help to your eternal soul. The praise of man cannot save you. The money of man cannot save you. The respect of man cannot save you.

My kids have introduced me to a phrase they picked up at school: "Don't yuck my yum." In other words, you might hate the idea of broccoli, but there are people who love it. The Bible upholds meekness over public meetings, humble service over lip service, private purity over public praise. Don't let the world yuck what Christ yums. You will be tempted. That's why Jesus stirs our affections to desire what he says is blessed: blessed are the meek, the peacekeepers, the poor in spirit. Jesus says this is what satisfies so we should be careful that our palettes are being groomed by his word and not the world's.

Lastly, and quickly, in turning to his disciples Jesus gives ***Reform to the Leadership of the Church.***

We don't have offices of scribes or Pharisees in the church today, but we do have pastors, deacons and church members. The nature of leadership in Jesus' church is not to steal praise for ourselves, but instead to steward the praise of God. Gregory the Great, warned pastors in the 10th century that a leader in God's church who is more concerned about his own praise in the church is just as guilty of adultery as a groomsman would be who tried to catch the eye of a bride when he was sent by the groom to deliver her a gift on his behalf.

Brother elders are shepherds not saviors. We are servants not celebrities. We are givers of praise, not getters of praise.

It's been said that elders serve the church by leading it and deacons lead the church by serving it. Do you desire one of those offices? Then submit yourselves to the posture and qualifications of those positions now without a title. Servants in Jesus' church do not serve for a title given by man, but instead we serve to please the eye Jesus and trust him to work out the details in the rest of the church.

The praise of man is attractive but ends in condemnation. But the praise of God is effective to deliver us and to care for his church.

This leads us to the following verses in Luke (**Luke 21:1-4**): "Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, 'Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.'"

Here we see our second point this morning: **The Provision of Being Seen By Jesus.**

Right after speaking of widows being devoured, Jesus transitions to a destitute widow commended by Jesus.

As Jesus taught in the outer courts there would have been roughly 13 offering boxes shaped like trumpets placed all around it. Some historians believe it was the practice at this time for an attendant to announce the amount of each person's gift.

Can you imagine how you would feel if I read off publically how much each of you gave last week? I imagine the sinking feeling would be quite the same as when that bully on the school yard told everyone about your secret crush. Why is that?

I think it's for two reasons. First, we cannot divorce our generosity from our heart. To hear where we spend our money is to hear where we spend our affections. Second, it exposes the paranoia of the fear of man. When others hear what we give we may worry that they think it too little, or we worry that they might think it too much and we are legalistic, or conclude that we make far too much money and resent us. Whether there was an announcement or not in the temple—Jesus announced it. Our bookkeeper can't discern your heart by your giving statements—but Jesus can.

This shows us that the problems of affection and attention can only be solved when we have confidence first and foremost between our hearts and God. Only a fear of God displaces a fear of man. Jesus' exposure here rebukes the corporate bankruptcy of Israel while also commending the individual heart of the widow and calling us to desire that whom the scribes devoured.

Corporately speaking, Jesus' words expand the rebuke given to the scribes and invites critique to the broader group of Jewish elite.

In the book of Deuteronomy the law groups together three kinds of people who are typically the most vulnerable in society: the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. The law said that when the Jews harvested in their fields they were not to harvest everything. They were to leave some of it for the orphans, the sojourners and the widows. They were to open their fields for others. Through this practice and the giving of tithes to the temple and to the care of the poor Moses says that **(Deuteronomy 26:12)**, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow "may eat within your towns and be full."

So when Jesus points out rich people who have an abundance and a poor widow who goes on to have absolutely nothing—it's meant to show the failure of the whole nation.

There, in the temple, in the place of God's very presence were those who, though having an abundance, were empty of concern and affection—not just for a widow, but for a poor Jewish widow with nothing left in her name.

As the New Testament church, we are not called to the same Levitical law as the Jews were. But even in our own body, our care for those who are truly widows is of deep significance to our own faithfulness.

James again reminds us **(James 1:27)**, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

Here again we see that the biggest threat to generosity and service is the affections of the world.

The Bible makes it very clear that believers are responsible to care for their families. If you have a parent who is a widow (or even a widower), or if your grand-parent, aunt or uncle is—you as their family member are to be responsible for caring for them. But also, if there is no family to help, or if the family is unable on care on their, then we as the church are to be quick, eager and zealous to do unto them what Christ has done for us. The reason why such mercy is on the forefront in both the OT and NT is that it's connected to our own identity. God tells Israel they are to show compassion because they were once sojourners and orphans in Egypt. We were once alone and destitute, but Christ provided for us.

I would commend any community groups meeting this week to read together 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and discuss how we might better model and have eyes for this area of deep concern to the Lord's heart.

But I want to move on from this corporate application to focus on the personal implications of this text. Because in drawing our attention to the two gifts Jesus reveals two hearts.

So what was going on these two hearts?

Well, for the first part the rich gave out of their abundance. That is to say they gave out of nothing more than their bank account. But the widow gave out of her life.

How easy is it for us, regardless of how much we give, to give merely to check off a box—but never out of a spirit of generosity or sincerity? If these men were sincere about being generous, they would not have merely given to the temple, but they would have helped this widow who so publically and visibly had so little.

As Christians we are called to use our bank accounts, but we are to give out of our hearts, out of our lives. We are not to give out of our abundance, but out of our affections. As I prepared to preach on this text it sparked a fruitful conversation with me and my wife.

If you were to look at my giving statements you would probably say, "Tyler and Sarah give faithfully and generously to the church." But here's the catch, we automate our giving so that it comes out automatically every month to the church. I do this in part because it's often easy for me to forget. But to be honest because our offering is one of the larger line items in our budget...I give online in hopes that I won't feel it.

I want to give out of my bank account, but I don't want to feel the potential anxiety, trust and worship it would take to give out of my heart. Sarah told me of an older pastor of hers who would only give twice a year. He did so because it felt safe to give monthly, the amount wasn't terribly large and he felt like he could manage it out of his abundance. But when he saved all those monthly gifts up into a larger one time gift—he gave out of his emotions and affections. He felt it in a good way.

This idea of from where we give is really the main point of the text than any specific amount. Because as we transition to look at the widows heart we see that the rich gave thinking everything was ok but Jesus exposed it was not. The widow however gave knowing everything was not ok, but the recognition of Jesus showed that everything was in fact ok.

What she gave was two small coins, two *leptas*. This lepta would have been 1/64th of a day's wages. So in essence it would have been 9.5 minutes worth of your two week paycheck. But Jesus says it was her life.

Now we don't see in the New Testament that believers are required to give 10%, though according to the Old Testament that's a good starting point. But neither do we see that believers are required to give themselves into nothingness.

In fact **Proverbs 21:20** says, "Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling but a foolish man devours it." In other words as a general principle a wise man knows when to spend and when to save and only a fool eats through all of his money.

But despite that principle, and despite that Jesus isn't commending a giving unto poverty as a rule here, I do think that much of the western church fears poverty a bit too much.

Writing in the 1600's Richard Baxter says this, **"And I must further say, that this poverty is not so intolerable and dangerous a thing as it is pretended to be. If you have but food and raiment, must you not be therewith content?...If your clothing be warm, and your food be wholesome, you may as well be supported by it to do God's service."**

Here it benefits us in the west to look at the church in the global south where Christians make up the largest demographic of those in poverty. But we also see that it is from those countries that giving to missions and sending out missionaries is sky-rocketing. God doesn't need our abundance to do great things—he wants our lives. He wants our hearts.

As a pastor, I'm not sure I would have advised this woman to give this much—but that's kind of the point isn't it? She didn't have good pastors looking out for her. She didn't have anyone to say, "Give your coins but let me fill your pantry." She didn't have anyone even compelling her to give it but she gave it. Why?

When I get to heaven there's a lot of people I want to meet. But I want to meet this woman. I want to sit down and see what she saw. Because I'm sure what we would find is that despite her mistreatment by the scribes, despite her invisibility among her own people, despite her limited and soon to be exhausted resources her faith in God was inexhaustible.

She gave at the temple because she trusted God to take care of her even when others weren't. Her hope wasn't in her penny her hope was that the presence of God would make a way.

You see none of us are saved by how much we give. **Psalm 49:7-8** says, "Truly no man can ransom another or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of a life is costly and can never suffice." The problem of sin can't be undone by charitable giving or any financial offering. Our salvation and our provision can only come from the single offering of Jesus Christ.

And as this widow endure the mistreatment of her fellow Jews and perhaps even the shame of her meager gift being announced amidst gifts of far greater value—she heard out of the corner of the room: "Truly I tell you this poor widow has put in more."

Someone noticed her. Though neglected and ignored by all in her poverty, here is the one who saw her, who knew her, and who would give back to her—her life.

She trusted that God would provide in putting in her coins and she had no idea the provision God was working for that day. She gave her life and received the commendation of the one who would save it.

Little did she know that the one who noticed her in that courtyard was not going to simply open up a field for the widows, but he was going to open up his own body for the sinners. True provision, had come.

Paul says of believers in **2 Corinthians 6:8b-10**, "We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything."

Dear church, to possess Jesus through faith is to have the promise of provision. He has provided for us the relief from sin and the welcome of God. He has won us to the abundant storehouses not of worldly

abundance, but of heavenly abundance. He has paid our ransom, and we can never empty what Christ has filled.

So let us not fear man. Let us not try and take from them what is only given in the gospel. And let us instead strive to be this widow—let us give, love, care, and worship knowing that God has provided. May we not be declared bankrupt of mercy, but let us lavish on others kindness. Let us not find our joy in the praise of men, but instead find our joy in giving praise to the one who gave himself for us.