

A Widow's Offering: Praise or Lament?

Luke 20:45-21:6

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 15, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

⁴⁵ In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, ⁴⁶ "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

¹ He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ² he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³ He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; ⁴ for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

⁵ When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶ "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." (Luke 20:45-21:6, NRSV)

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"In the hearing of all the people Jesus said to the disciples, "Beware..."

In the verses that follow we are going to find out exactly what is meant by Jesus' warning. And we would be wise to pay attention because Christ's warning wasn't just for the twelve who followed him that day but for all who would follow him thereafter. That's us. If you are somebody who is a follower of Jesus then listen carefully to the warning he has for you here. It's given in love.

In this passage we are introduced to two groups of people who were permanent fixtures on opposite ends of the social ladder in Jesus' day, scribes and widows. One the one hand, scribes were the religious legal experts of that time, interpreters of God's law. Naturally, this gave them a very elevated social status, a status which many of them used to their own advantage. As Jesus points out here, they walked around in long robes, using their clothing as a way to signify their status. In the market place, the temple, and around banquet tables, they always sought after the best seats in the house.

At the polar opposite of the social spectrum, widows in those days were likely the weakest and most defenseless people in town. A widow had no inheritance rights, which meant that when she lost her husband she lost everything and was immediately exposed to harsh treatment, exploitation, and even condemnation as others suggested that her lot in life was the punishment for sin, either hers or her dead husbands'. Sometimes families would take these women in, but often not. That meant that they were forced to rely on public charity, which in those days did not include Social Security or Medicare. Basically, they had to beg just to get enough bread to survive the day.

So how did these two groups relate to one another? Jesus is clear. The scribes "**devour widows' houses.**" Exactly how this happened isn't precisely clear, but biblical scholars have concluded that it likely involved some combination of fraud and exploitation. As we'll see evidenced in a moment it probably also included creating a religious system which twisted the law to make these women believe that they needed to give away even what little they did have if they hoped to have any chance of earning God's favor. Then the religious leaders would use these gifts to increase luxury and status in their own lives. This was those at the top using whatever means they could use, even religious means, to heighten their position at the expense of those on the bottom.

And Jesus says to us, his disciples, "**Beware...**" If you are in a position to do likewise beware that you do not do likewise.

So does this sort of thing happen today?¹ Of course it does. The oppression of those on the bottom by those at the top happens, or has happened, in one way or another in every single society around the world and down through history.

Colin Kaepernick starting taking a knee during the National Anthem last football season as a way to protest what he believes is the unjust treatment of

¹ Things are somewhat different, of course, because our society, unlike ancient Jewish society, is more divided between the religious and the secular, the church and the state, which means that today injustice can happen in one realm without happening in the other. Back then it was one in the same. Even so, who can argue that this sort of thing doesn't happen today?

African Americans in this country. Now, I'm not going to choose up sides this morning in the debate around standing for the National Anthem. I hope you recognize that there are thoughtful, faithful, loving people on both sides of that debate. I have my view and I'm sure you have your view, and there are good times and good places to have that debate. The pulpit, however, is not a place to choose sides in these sorts of cultural divides.

Having said that, in response to the reasons some NFL players have decided to take a knee, I have made a point of sitting down and listening to some of my African American friends, asking them to tell me what it has been like for them to grow up and live in this society as people of color. Here's what I am beginning to learn. I am absolutely convinced that there have been instances when these friends, because of the color of their skin, have been treated unjustly in ways that I have not, or will not, be treated because of the color of my skin. At this point you will not be able to convince me otherwise. I have heard too much from friends I trust to make clear to me that in too many instances justice in our society is not color blind.

Now listen very carefully to me. I am not making a *political* statement. I'm not up here endorsing one movement or another, condemning one group or another, taking one side over another, or even placing blame with one group or another. You will not ever hear me use my position in the church to take sides in those ways because Jesus, the one I'm trying to follow, never used *his* position to take political sides, in spite of the fact that lots of people tried like crazy to get him to. No, that is not our way as followers of Jesus. All I'm trying to acknowledge here is that in our society, just like in every single society on earth, there are systems and beliefs and motives in place which, in effect, oppress some for the benefit of others. It happened in Jesus' day. It happens in our day.

And Jesus says to us, his disciples, "**Beware...**"

Notice something interesting. Jesus tells us that "**for the sake of appearance [the scribes] say long prayers.**" He's inferring here that these scribes, in an effort to make themselves appear compassionate, would actually pray for widows and others like them. In fact, apparently such prayers would go on and on and on. But that's it. It all ended there with Amen. The whole thing was just a show because they then did nothing to help the cause of the ones for whom they prayed. In the end, their practice didn't match their piety.² And if you

know anything about Jesus, there is nothing that will make him angry as much as when the practice of religious people doesn't match their piety, when our religion becomes a show, empty of mercy, humility and love. "**They will receive,**" Jesus says here, "**the greater condemnation.**" And his words stop me in my tracks. Lord, have mercy. Are there not ways in my own life when the concern I have articulated for the poor, even in my preaching and prayers, has merely been a show to prop up my own image before others? Lord, have mercy.

Well, in the very moment Jesus speaks these words he looks up and watches this scene unfold before him. And as his attention shifts, so does the attention of everybody else. There in the Jerusalem Temple, in the outer court where both men and women were allowed, had been placed thirteen receptacles which were shaped like inverted megaphones so that people, as they came to worship, could put in their offerings. Obviously, giving was a very public act in those days. In fact, some wealthy people of the day liked to make a great show of how much they gave, so much so that some of them would hire trumpeters to herald their donations!³ Imagine employing one of the Faith brass to stand in the pew behind you and give a blast just as you drop your offering into the plate so that everybody else would be alerted that you'd just given a very sizable gift.

So all this is going on and we're told that Jesus and the others watched as many rich people came along and dropped in large gifts, some perhaps to sound of brass. But then along comes one of these poor widows and drops in two copper coins. These coins were called lepta and in those days 132 lepta would have constituted a day's wage for a common day laborer.⁴ In our terms, this woman, *at most*, is putting \$1.25 in the offering plate and, without any fanfare whatsoever, everybody is watching her do it. And somehow Jesus knows that this is all she has to her name. Who knows how she's going to eat dinner that night?

Now, most of you have heard this story lifted up as a beautiful example of generosity, an example Jesus has given us to follow in our own Christian giving. I've used it that way myself from this very pulpit. Being that it's Stewardship Sunday today, you may have already jumped ahead in your mind to one of many lessons you anticipate you're about to hear. The true measure of the gift is not how much is given but how much remains behind. It's not the amount of the gift

² See the warning we're giving along these lines in James 2:15-16.

³ William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: The Gospel of Mark* (Westminster, 1854), 316.

⁴ Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans, 1997), 728.

that matters most, but the spirit in which it is given. Our gifts are measured by sacrifice, not amount. The one who is truly generous is the one who gives away everything.⁵

I want to suggest to you that even though many of those lessons are true and, in fact, could be easily supported by plenty of *other* biblical texts, that is *not* the lesson we are being given in this text.

Imagine this scene. It's a summer day at the community pool. There are six fully-trained, bronzed-bodied lifeguards standing around the pool, each with a life-saving ring in their hands. All of a sudden an older woman in the middle of the pool goes under. It's clear to everybody that she can't swim and needs to be saved. But the lifeguards do nothing. After all, the water is cold. Their suits are dry. The woman is thrashing about and presenting a danger to anybody who might try to help her. In the end, it's an older gentleman, a guest at the pool, who jumps in to help. The problem is that he can't swim well himself. Ultimately he does rescue the drowning woman, but barely, nearly drowning himself in the process.

Now I know that this is far from the perfect analogy, but humor me for a minute. If Jesus happened to be poolside that day, is there a single one of us here that can imagine that, from what we know about Jesus, his only response to that scene would be to praise the example of the man who risked his life? Not for a minute! Likely, Jesus' first response would be righteous indignation towards those lifeguards, who, thinking only of themselves, stood by and watched this all happen while they had in their possession everything necessary to bring this woman to safety.

Notice something about this story I never before noticed. Jesus' words here are not praise but lament. In fact, nowhere in the text are we told that Jesus praises the woman. If this story ended like so many other stories in the Gospels where people are lifted up as examples, it would have ended with some motivational statement like, "Jesus looked at her and loved her", or "Truly I tell you, she is not far from the Kingdom of God", or "Go and do likewise." But no, we have none of that here. All we have from Jesus are the facts. The rich gave only out of their abundance, gifts that cost them very little. This woman, on the other hand, gave all she had. Comparatively, therefore, she gave more.

You see, there is no praise, just the facts. We don't even know her motivation. We assume we do. We assume she was motivated by generosity. But actually everything in the text and the context suggests that she did not give because she was generous, but that she gave because she had been spiritually bullied into believing that the only way for her to ever earn her way into the kingdom of God was to give away her last dollar. Jesus doesn't blame *her* for that, of course, but instead blames those who had set up the kind of system that suckered people like her into giving what little they had so that others, who already had so much, could have even more. Jesus here is condemning the value system that motivates her action and rebuking the people who set it up in the first place.

Later this month we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the day when a German monk named Martin Luther nailed a list of propositions, later known as the Ninety-five Theses, on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg. The list, which was eventually widely circulated, advanced Luther's positions against many heretical teachings and abusive practices he saw taking place in the church of his day. For one, priests at that time were selling indulgences to the poor. A person bought one of these certificates because they had been told that it would reduce the punishment for sin which they, and even their loved ones, were sure to otherwise endure in purgatory. At the heart of this practice, of course, was the claim that salvation from God was earned rather than a gift of grace, a claim that Luther came to realize was antithetical to the gospel. Those, of course, most negatively impacted by this system of oppression were the poor. Those most positively impacted were the already rich church leadership who took advantage of this false teaching and the widespread biblical ignorance of the people to line their own pockets. Luther's resulting indignation is exemplified in number eighty-six on his list of theses. He writes: "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?"

In no way was Luther condemning the poor who had been suckered into giving what little they had to buy these indulgences. Similarly, in no way is Jesus condemning this poor widow, but those who have used her up for their own gain. Practices of piety are not necessarily in and of themselves bad. Giving an offering, singing songs in worship, building temples and church buildings, planning programs and retreats, offering prayers, preaching sermons. Unlike selling indulgences, there are plenty of *good* religious practices. But the moment that those practices, even the best of them, is carried on at the expense of meeting human

⁵ Addison Wright highlights these common interpretations in his excellent article: "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament? A Matter of Context" (*The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Volume 33, No 2, April 1982, 256-265). Obviously, the title of this sermon was inspired by the title of his article.

need, or done without compassion and love especially for the least of these, then even the best religious practice becomes an offense to God.

And Jesus says to those who follow him, “**Beware...**” He says to us, “**Beware...**” Remember, we are the disciples listening in to his teaching, watching over his shoulder as he tells the truth about what’s behind this widow’s gift. What’s more, most of us in this room find ourselves among the group in our world that has vastly more wealth than the majority. In terms of wealth, we’re much closer to the scribes than to the widow.

Today, nearly one billion people live in extreme poverty, trying to survive on less than \$2 a day.⁶ Like some of you, I’ve been to places where every single person in the community has materially far less than I have. Yes, some of those communities are in faraway places like Ethiopia, but some of them are right here in our own city. And I know that the reasons for this inequity in our world are many and the solutions are not simple. Again, good, faithful, thoughtful people regularly disagree on both the causes of and the solutions for poverty. And though the pulpit isn’t the place to debate policies and practices, as Christians we need to enter the public square where can be engaged in that debate daily.

Having said that, here’s how Jesus’ warning hits me, both on an individual level and a corporate level. Here’s what I *can* say – what I *need* to say! – from the pulpit. First the individual.

For some reason I decided to count my shoes this week. I currently have in my possession 21 pairs of shoes, many of which I hardly ever wear. I have met people, many of them children, who have no shoes or, at best, one pair they wear every day no matter the occasion. Now, I love a new pair of shoes. I’ll be honest. I really do. Nothing like a new pair of Nikes. But this is where the rubber meets the road as we follow Jesus, at least on an individual level. What does it mean that I live in a world where I have 21 pairs of shoes and millions of children go barefoot every day? What systems or circumstances have contributed to this reality? I’ll be honest. Like some of you, it’s not a question I want to face, especially on a Sunday morning. But if I’m going to engage Jesus honestly, as he demands that we engage him, listening to what he actually says and not what we imagine we want him to say, how can I not face the question?

Again, listen very carefully to me. I do not want to be misunderstood. I don’t care how many pairs of shoes

you have. It’s actually none of my business. The very last thing we ever want to do around here is start counting one another’s shoes or, worse, setting some arbitrary number of shoes that a person should have if he or she *really* loves Jesus. No, that sort of legalism is no better than the sort of legalism the scribes were using to crush people in their day. Some people need more shoes than other people and I actually think that’s just fine with Jesus. He doesn’t treat us all the same.

So what’s in your closet, along with what’s in your wallet, your garage, or your investment portfolio, is between you and Jesus. But that doesn’t let you off the hook. It’s still between you and Jesus and so you have to work that out with him. So do I. It matters. And in the face of such overwhelming need in our world, even right here in our own backyard, if we as followers of Christ are not handling our material wealth in a radically differently way than those around us with similar wealth who are not followers of Christ than we need to rightly question whether or not we are following Christ in the first place. Again, I’m not that going to answer these questions for you, nor you for me. It’s Jesus who is putting the question to each of us, not only about shoes but about everything he’s put into our hands, and so we must work out the answers with him.

Let’s not be surprised, however, if many of us find out that we need fewer shoes than we have been led to think we do, and that we ought to be giving away more than we have been led to think we should. It’s also true that there are probably some who should give less. The scribes that day should have stopped that woman from giving her last few coins and encouraged her to instead use it for dinner. Better yet, they should have fed her themselves. And there probably are a few people in the church we ought to encourage to put their wallets away and save what little they have while the rest of us, who have so much more than we need already, find ways to excel in generosity to the point of joy and for the sake of those who don’t have enough.

But Jesus’ warning here hit’s us not only on an individual level but hits us collectively on a corporate level as well. Notice that after the incident with the widow, Luke records Jesus’ prediction that the beautifully adorned Temple that was before them would soon be torn down. This was the Temple built by Herod the Great not long before this time. It was double the size of the first Temple and compared to the rustic nature of Jerusalem in those days, it’s sheer size and opulent magnificence would have stood out in stunning contrast. Gold plates covered its façade.

⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-34440567>

White marble adorned its upper reaches.⁷ And much of it, of course, was built on the offerings of poor widows like this one, one copper coin at a time. For this reason, Jesus speaks prophetically when he says that any community or system that suckers the poor in this way will eventually be torn down.

And Jesus says to those of us who follow him, **“Beware...”**

Jesus isn't against Temples. The Jews originally built the Temple, in fact, because God told them to build it. Jesus also isn't against church buildings like this one. He's not against musical instruments or sound systems, or summer camps, or church programs, or religious pilgrimages to the Holy Land, or libraries full of books, or retreats in Tahoe, or copy machines, or potluck dinners, or staff salaries and benefits, or any of the things we as a community designate in our budget, any more than Jesus is against you or me owning a good pair of running shoes. And whole church communities can be just as legalistic as individuals when they start looking at one another and suggesting, even politely, that if you all really loved Jesus you wouldn't be spending your money that way. Again, that is a conversation we are supposed to have directly with Jesus, focused solely on our community and not other communities. In some ways, that is the responsibility we have asked of our leaders here, me included.

In a few moments we are going to be given the opportunity to make a financial pledge towards the ministry of this church in the year to come. Just so you know, nobody is going to announce their gift. No trumpets are going to blow. But many of you, I know, have spent time carefully and humbly listening to Jesus and have come prepared to make a gift that is both sacrificial *and* joyful. Again, that has less to do with the size of the gift and more to do with the spirit in which it is given.

That being true, it is the very serious work of the leadership of this church to collect those gifts and then to do our absolute best to seek the heart of Christ in how they are to be distributed in the coming year. Put another way, how many “shoes” does this church need? I'll tell you this much, even the resources we keep to ourselves, for the internal ministry of this church, absolutely must be used toward the end goal of reaching out to a world absolutely overflowing with broken people. Whether it be worship services we hold, or improvements on this building where we meet, or programs we offer, or supplies we purchase, or staff we pay to lead and administrate it all, the end goal of the

ways we distribute these resources must not ultimately be the *elevation* of ourselves, but the *equipping* of ourselves to be sent out into the world to join Jesus wherever he already is at work among people like this poor widow who have been absolutely crushed by systems of injustice in our world. Everything we give must ultimately be used for the sharing, in both word *and* deed, of the good news of Jesus Christ with the broken world around us.

This puts a very serious responsibility on the leadership of our church, me included, to use the gifts we all are about to pledge towards this end, specifically towards ways we are called to, along with Jesus, bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom to the captives, give sight to the blind, and declare the reality of God's favor to those in this world who have no idea how much they are forgiven and loved. That's the challenge I believe is before us as leaders. There isn't one way for us to do this, of course. Just as Jesus calls different individuals to serve in different ways from one another, he also calls congregations to serve in different ways. And we can't do it all, of course. The need is too great, the brokenness too widespread. And so as one person said, we ought to try to do for one person, for one community, that which we wish we could do for every person and every community.

Yes, Jesus is saying to those of us who follow him, **“Beware...”** But his warning is not rooted in condemnation but love. Love for those in this world who are in desperate need, yes. But also love for us as well. This is Jesus, the one about whom was said, **“Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”**⁸ His warning to make sure we live with generous hands and hearts, holding loosely to the material things in this world, is given not just for the sake of those of us who are in material need but for the sake of those who need to learn that our material things are not ultimately what we need. If we trust the one who has already given everything for our sakes, we find ourselves set free to do the same for one another knowing that we have already been made rich, no matter how many shoes we are left with in our closet.

So let's pray for one another, both as individuals and a community, as we do our best to try to listen to what Jesus is telling us to do in these matters, and then to do in faith whatever it is that he tells us to do. Know that I am grateful in my heart to have found myself in a congregation full of people like you who are so willing to do so. Amen.

⁷ Green, 733.

⁸ II Corinthians 8:9, NRSV



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Once again read the text from Luke 20:45-21:6. Likely this is a story you have heard many times before. Listen to it with fresh ears, paying attention the context. What do you notice here that you never noticed before?
2. Why do you think Jesus brings this woman and her offering to the attention of his disciples? Is this praise or lament? Is he setting her up as an example of generous giving (praise), or is he condemning the attitudes and systems that would lead a widow to give her last few pennies away (lament)?
3. Who are the 'widows' of our day, those who being crushed under systems or attitudes set up to benefit some at the expense of others?
4. Have you ever had the experience of realizing that you are participating, maybe unknowingly, in systems or attitudes that exist for the benefit of some at the expense of others? Resist pointing out how others have done this and focus solely on yourself.
5. Jesus suggests that these religious leaders were praying for these widows while, at the same time, doing nothing to actually help them. How have we been guilty of this in the church, of not letting our practice match our piety?
6. What do you believe that Jesus is saying to you personally in this story? How are you changed, or led to be changed, by this text? If you want a practical place to begin, ask Jesus how many shoes he wants you to have in your closet? (Don't ask him how many shoes anybody else should have. That's not your business.)
7. What about as a community? What do you think Jesus is saying to us as a congregation in this story? How are we changed, or led to be changed, by this text? How should we use our resources in ways that better address the broken world outside our doors?

8. When you look at all the need and brokenness in our world, who specifically has God put on your heart? We can't help everyone, but we can do for one (or one community) what we wish we could do for everyone. What 'one' has God put on your heart?

Table to Table Question
A question for kids and adults to answer together

Somebody once said that the things which make God sad should make us sad too. God is sad when people in our world are hurting. Where do see hurting people that make us sad? What is one way we can show God's love to them?