

“Long on Prayer and Short on Compassion”

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Mark 12:38-41

As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

LONG PRAYERS

According to Jesus, the Scribes said long prayers.
But, they didn’t say those long prayers to talk to God.

They said those long prayers for the sake of appearance.

They wanted everyone to know that they were super religious.

In addition to the long prayers they wore prayer shawls that were as long as a robe.

We talk about people wearing their religion on their sleeve.

The scribes really did that.

The scribes reveled in the fact that people greeted them with respect and honor in the marketplaces. They insisted on taking the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.

The scribes were serious about religion.
They were well educated.
They preserved Scripture with meticulous attention to detail.

Everyone respected the scribes.

They were the religious and social elite of that society.

They were the movers and shakers.

BEWARE

But, Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes.
Watch out for these guys."

The primary meaning of the word translated "beware" is "see" or "discern".

So, the sense is that disciples need to be discerning when it comes to religious leaders.

They need to see through this charade of piety and discern the true motives of the scribes.

The yardstick for measuring true piety is not the length of ones prayers.

The yardstick for measuring true piety is the amount of compassion one shows toward those who are most helpless.

These scribes know the right answers
when it comes to God.

And they want everyone to know
that they got an "A" on their theology exam.

They talk the talk.
But unfortunately, they don't walk the walk.

They recite long prayers.

But they aren't shaped by them.

They know the great commandment,
to love the Lord with all your heart, soul and mind
and to love your neighbor as yourself.

They just don't follow the great commandment.

And in this regard the scribes had failed.

Long prayers cannot make you holy
when you are short on compassion.

DEVOUR WIDOW'S HOUSES

And the scribes were definitely short on compassion.
Jesus said that they "devour widow's houses".

The superior education of the scribes gave them a big advantage.

They not only preserved scripture;
they also were in charge of legal and financial documents.

They were sort of like religious leaders, lawyers and accountants all rolled
into one.

Money, power, politics and religion came together in the work of the
scribes. (Isn't it funny how that's still true today.)

No wonder they got the seats of honor in the temple and at banquets.

They were people with great power.

But, such power can tempt people to take advantage of the weak.
Such was the case with some of the scribes.

Instead of using their power and influence
to make things better,
they used their power to power to exploit the most vulnerable members of
society.

They "devoured widow's houses".

That probably means that some scribes used their legal and financial skills to exploit widows in transactions involving their houses and personal property.

In other words,
they engaged in merciless materialism.

The scribes preyed upon the most vulnerable
for personal gain
while they prayed long prayers before others to prove their devotion to
God.

This was more than just an unscrupulous person here or there taking advantage of a person at risk. This was systematic oppression of the poor by the rich and powerful.

They used the temple and the government to institutionalize an advantage for the well off and the well connected.

Long on prayer.
Short on compassion.

SEEING HYPOCRISY TODAY

Jesus' judgment of this materialistic piety was harsh and to the point. He said,

"They will receive the greater condemnation."

The actions of the scribes was in direct opposition to the clear teaching of God's Word.

When you read the law
and the prophets
and the Psalms
and the gospels,
the message is the same.

Righteousness is measured by our willingness to take care of those who are most vulnerable.

Several groups were often singled out for protection and care: orphans, widows, the poor, and immigrants.

I wonder.

What might this passage be saying to us in our day and time?
How can we beware of the scribes?
How can protect those who are most vulnerable?

How can we make sure that the institutions of society, the church and the state, work for the interests of those who are most vulnerable?

It's easy for us to judge the hypocrisy of those ancient scribes.
It's easy for us to rail at the hypocrisy of the distant past.

We can easily see why they should be judged most harshly.

But, sometimes it's not so easy to see through the hypocrisy that prevails in our own day.

How do people use religion, politics, and the law to exploit the most vulnerable today?
Who are the modern day scribes that we should watch out for?

Who deserves the greater condemnation?

I would suspect that all of us could easily point out leaders that, in our opinion, deserve the greater condemnation.

But, I also think that all of us would have our blindspots when it comes to what I would call institutional injustice.

Religion is still used by some
as a pretext for material gain.
The law is still used by some
to take advantage of the weakest among us.

There are still politicians
who make a public show of piety.
And yet at the same time, they promote policies designed to line their own
pockets.

Jesus tells us,
“Beware of these people.
You need to see through what they are doing.”

But, often we don't see through
their self-centered ploys.
Why?

Because they tell us what we want to hear.
They prey upon our own sinfulness and pride.

They enable us to turn a blind eye to the plight of those who are most vul-
nerable.
They keep us from seeing what we don't want to see.

JESUS SEES THE WIDOW'S OFFERING

But, Jesus doesn't let us turn a blind eye to those who are vulnerable.

Notice the second section in our lesson for today.
Jesus saw something that no one else could see.

Others noticed people putting money in the temple treasury.

They especially noticed the large sums contributed by the rich folk.

There was no folding money in those days, just coins. And they put those
coins in a chest that had a trumpet like opening.

Well, you can imagine that a lot of coins being poured into this chest would make a loud sound.

It would be a lot like the sound made when our children pour the 2 cents a meal money into our bucket.

People got a lot of public recognition for their offerings.

Their offerings would literally sound the trumpet.

I wonder if this is what Jesus was talking about in Matthew's gospel when he said,

Matthew 6:2 "So whenever you give alms, do not *sound a trumpet before you*, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others..."

What others noticed and approved, Jesus ignored or even condemned.

But, what others ignored Jesus noticed.

A poor widow put in two small copper coins.
It wasn't much.

Those two small coins were only worth about a penny.

But, according to Jesus this contribution was significant.

It was "all she had to live on."

NOT STEWARDSHIP BUT ECONOMIC INJUSTICE

This is the point in the story when the preacher begins his or her stewardship sermon.

If the poor widow could give all she had, then surely you can give a bit more to our stewardship campaign.

But, there's a problem.

This passage is not about stewardship.
This passage is about economic injustice.

Some commentators suggest that everyone was required to give a minimum amount to the temple treasury.

Her gift was a prime example of a corrupt religious and political system that was built on the backs of the poor.

The widow's story is about a vulnerable woman being exploited even more by a system that was designed to favor the rich over the poor.

Modern day examples might be things like:
cash bail,
payday loans,
court fines that keep escalating.

We have an economic system that often favors the rich over the poor.

The widow putting in her last coin is like refugees and migrants paying smugglers their life savings as they flee for their lives.

The point of the passage is this.
The widow shouldn't be giving all she has to the temple treasury.

The scribes of the temple should be giving money from that treasury to care for the widow!

The requirements of the temple have robbed this woman of her livelihood.

Religion was being used to exploit the very people the Bible tells us we should protect.

JUDGMENT

In the passage that follows our lesson, Jesus makes his disgust at this unjust system very clear.

When the disciples praise the beauty of the temple, Jesus says, "It's all going to be torn down."

And then Jesus leaves the temple for the final time.
A religious institution that does not care for the poor will be judged most harshly.

How is our faithfulness to God
and to Christ measured?

Again and again the answer is the same.

Our faithfulness is measured by how we treat the poor and the vulnerable.

Our faithfulness is measured by how we treat the least of these.

Again and again God's prophets and God's Son reserve their harshest judgment for those who say they believe in God while at the same time doing things that hurt those who are suffering.

Woe to the Scribes, Pharisees, unjust judges and anyone who does not extend compassion and mercy and care to widows and orphans ...and yes, even immigrants.

IMMIGRANTS

It's interesting to note that God's people, the Jews considered themselves to be a nation of immigrants.

One of their earliest creeds begins
"My father was a wandering Aramean..."

In this creed God's people remember
that they were harshly treated
when they were strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt.

But, because of this history they would treat those who immigrated to the Promised Land differently.

They would welcome them and allow them to become a part of this land of plenty that God had given them. (Deuteronomy 26:5-11)

That story continues in the New Testament.

Think about the birth of Jesus.
He was born in a stable.
He was from the very beginning among the most vulnerable.

The king wanted him dead
so Mary and Joseph had to immigrate to Egypt.
In today's world they would have applied for political asylum because their
lives were in danger.

God not only cares about
those who are most vulnerable.
His Word became flesh and blood among those who were most vulnerable.

That's why we tell the story each Christmas.
It's not a warm fuzzy story about a cute little baby.

It's about how God comes in the flesh
to those places where people are oppressed.

He dwells among us.
And he loves us so much he dies for us.

Jesus died on the cross
because he stood up to a political
and religious system that was stacked against those little ones that God
loved.

THE BATTLE FOR JUSTICE CONTINUES

We know that in the end it was not Jesus
who was judged.

The principalities and the powers were judged
The forces of evil were judged by the power of the cross and the resurrec-
tion.

And the battle for faith and justice continues.
Our society and our faith will be judged by how we treat the least among
us.

I'll admit.

There are some things in the Bible
that are ambiguous.

There are some things in the Bible that are open to interpretation.

This is not one of them.

This principle is crystal clear
from Genesis to Revelation.

God doesn't want us to be long on prayer and short on compassion.

God wants us to do what faith requires.
God wants us to put our prayers into action.

And if we don't do what faith requires,
everything else is futile.

Long prayers,
money contributed to the temple treasury,
elaborate liturgy and sweet smelling incense

...all those things don't mean a thing.

Jesus once warned hypocritical Pharisees,

Luke 11:42 "But woe to you Pharisees!
For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds,
and neglect justice and the love of God;
it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others."

Today Jesus warns us too.
Compassion is not optional when it comes to faith.

Prayer and compassion are two sides to the same coin.

Like love and marriage,
"You can't have one without the other."

Amen.