

Sermon Proper 27 2018

November 11, 2018

Mark 12: 38-44

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson which was previously read.

“And in his teaching [Jesus] said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers.’” As a pastor, all the more as a pastor who makes a point to wear robes, this passage is one I often avoid in preaching. To be clear, this isn’t because I’m afraid to acknowledge our Lord’s words here. Every pastor should be willing to acknowledge that temptation toward the adulation of man, and hopefully every pastor attempts to avoid devouring widows’ houses like the plague. So it’s not that. No. The reason I avoid it is how easily one could misunderstand Jesus as speaking against robes and against the clergy here.

I say this because in our culture, I think this is something that often happens. I’ve mentioned before that we have this sort of inherent distrust of authority as Americans—after all we were founded upon rebellion against an authority. When you take that inherent stream in our mindset and compound it with the prevailing philosophies of our day which see authority as inherently oppressive, then mix with that the stream of what is called Pietism—that is a movement in the church that came about in the 1700’s which said that pastors were unnecessary and could even be considered inhibitive to the spiritual growth of the real Christians—you have a perfect storm for these words to be misunderstood.

What I mean is that all of these factors create a mentality in people that the individual is the greatest authority in all things, that they know better than anyone else, and that no one else should say otherwise. I know I’ve mentioned this in my own life, that as I was coming into Lutheranism I had a mentality that because Scripture teaches the Priesthood of all Believers then pastors were maybe helpful as sort a mentor, but they weren’t necessary. In fact, I thought that I was best off with me and my Bible, maybe me and my Bible Study group, but that was the real heart of the church—pastors were sort of auxiliary at best.

My point being that in view of this lesson with all of that baggage, this week I realized something. I realized that sometimes rather than avoid a lesson or verses out of fear of what people think the lesson means, it could actually be good to teach what it doesn't mean. So what doesn't this lesson mean?

This lesson doesn't mean that we can look at clergy and despise them. In other words, what these words do not do is to give license to look upon the Office of the Ministry with contempt. Are there clergy for whom we should watch out because they are self-seeking? Of course, and Jesus calls us to beware of that. In our day, though rather than the issue being robes and marketplaces, it would perhaps be that we should watch out for preachers in \$3,000 tailor-made suits and \$100,000 cars, who love the adulation of being on Television shows and treated like celebrities. Who call for the already poor to give their last cents in trust that God will surely reward them with their best life now. That's a warning we can heed from this. But we cannot use this as a justification for our sins when we despise preaching and God's Word.

In fact, we can look at the other portion of this reading and understand that this whole passage can teach us the same thing: we cannot justify ourselves. And as I say that what do I mean with regard to the other portion, what we often call the widow's mite? After all how do we often hear that passage? Think about it when you hear the story of the widow's mite, what do you usually think of? You probably think of it as another opportunity for a stewardship sermon. And can we draw a theme for stewardship from this? Certainly. Look at Jesus' words: **"Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."** What does this tell us about stewardship? Be generous with your money, right? It's like I said a few weeks ago when we talked about the rich young man: don't give in order to meet the budget, give because God calls you to give first to Him and His Kingdom in the trust that He will take care of you.

But you see that's the rub here. This passage isn't about giving, in particular so that you can pat yourself on your back for how much you give. Have you given all? Your whole *bios*, as it says in the Greek—that is where we get the word biology, as in life. Have you given all you have to live on? Then don't pat yourself on your back for

your giving. Have you given out of your abundance? Then don't pat yourself on the back for that. And as I say that, I was listening last week to the podcast I've mentioned many times called Issues, etc. There was a great series from people who had not always been Lutheran and how they decided to convert. The one in particular was from a man who had been raised an Anglican, and at a point felt condemned by his unworthiness so he gave up his lucrative career in law to study the faith at Oxford. As he was there he finally realized that he still felt unworthy. In other words, it wasn't in his willingness to sacrifice all that he actually felt worthy. Even after giving that up, he still felt greedy and, in his own words, "still questioned [his] salvation."

What's the point? This exhortation to be generous will still not bring you the comfort of being able to stand before God and point to your good works. You won't be able to stand before God and say, "Look I watched out for clergy who were self-serving, look I gave away everything I had, now let me in!!" As you look at that widow, do you picture her, the quiet humble woman she clearly is, do you picture her coming before Jesus at the judgment and saying, "Jesus, do you remember how you commended me for giving up everything? That was really good, now let me in?" That's clearly not it, is it?

So that's not what this passage is about. It's not about patting ourselves on the back. In fact, it's not even there that I as a pastor can pat myself on the back when I'm having a good day and not seeking the adulation of men, and the wealth of the houses of widows, is it? It's not about that at all.

What is it then? It's about faith. How so? Well, think about it. How can this woman be so generous in the first place? She can only be so generous because of the God who is generous to her. And Christians, Jesus has been utterly generous to you. Not only has He given you earthly blessings, he has given you the promise of eternal life. He has left all of the riches, all of the comforts of heaven. He has left all of the glory and honor He rightly deserves, left all of the holiness that is there, and what did He do? He generously gave that up, laying down His life for your sin. He left all of that and came into this world where instead of riches and comfort, He had no place to lay His head. Instead of glory and honor, He came to endure mocking, insults, and suffering. Instead of holiness and life, He came to experience your sin and death. God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the

righteousness of God. Jesus in His resurrection promises that His generosity has won for you eternal riches.

Do you hear it there? He has done all of this and proven He is trustworthy. He is trustworthy for you and proves it all the more in baptizing you into that death and resurrection, proving it as He feeds you with that very body and blood crucified and raised for your forgiveness and life. Christian, this passage is not about self-justification. But it is about faith. Faith that trusts this generous Jesus that you would know of His love and gifts for you, that trusts Him more than the approval of men, that trusts Him more than riches, that believes His warnings, but also believes His promise that as His sent pastors proclaim His Word, he who hears them hears Jesus Himself.

And Christians, what we see is that in the end this release of self-justification, what this does actually make us more like that widow that Jesus commends. How? Faith. When we give up on our own goodness, our own strengths and abilities, all we have is to trust in Jesus' care and provision for us. We become ones who don't demand, don't feel entitled, who don't insist, but who are humbled. And listen to those words from the Psalm again about this: **“The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless.”** Such words are our comfort, and the promise to which we cling; the promise of His word given to us that we would hear it and hear it in the clear knowledge and faith in Him. Amen.