

Mark 12:38-44

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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On Scribes and Widows

The Word of the Lord from Mark 12:43-44: "And [Jesus] called His disciples to Him and said to them, '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.'"

This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you're walking down the crowded streets of Jerusalem during Passover in 33 A.D., you won't a greater contrast than that of a scribe and a widow.

It's good to be a scribe. You're in a city where the main attraction is the temple and a society that is centered on religious observance. That's your game: that's what you do, so you play the part and you enjoy it. You walk around in long robes, not the shorter versions of the day laborers with the calloused hands and the dirty faces. You walk through the marketplace, because that's where business gets done: it's the place to see and be seen, and you're happy to walk through and exchange greetings. Plenty of people want to greet you: some will greet you because they've just arrived for a feast in the big city and, to them, you're kind of a celebrity. Some will greet you out of political calculation, because they know their business will go better with friends like yourself. Some will greet you with respect for your office: around these parts, you're considered a man of God; and if they are to show proper respect to Him, they will also show proper respect to His man.

When it comes to the synagogue, you get one of the nice seats. When it comes to feasts, you're at the head table.

All this, and you have a decent income too. You get a stipend from the temple treasury, and part of what you teach is the importance of giving to the Lord's work as part good living. You might also get pay from patrons: you might have wealthy individuals who subsidize your work as a scribe, either because they sincerely want to or because it looks good to support the work of the Lord.

It is good to be a scribe.

It is not so good to be a widow; and in a medically-primitive time, widowhood happens a lot. There's the grief, of course: two became one, and when one dies the other is reduced to a half. But even apart from the mourning, there's almost inevitable suffering and poverty to come. In first-century Judea, there aren't many employment options for widows, and even fewer reputable ones. At best, it means dependence: some are fortunate enough to have family who will take them in and support them. If that's not the case, though, it's a life of poverty, hunger and begging. People don't greet widows in the marketplace; they act as if the women are holding cardboard signs at a street corner.

So if you were to poll random individuals in Jerusalem at that Passover in 33 A.D. and ask, "Which would you rather be – a scribe or a widow?", the results wouldn't be close at all. *Everybody* knows that it's better to be a scribe than a widow.

But then there's Jesus.

What does Jesus say of the scribes? He says beware of them. They might look good with the long robes, the good seats and their popularity among the crowds; but, says Jesus, they also "devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers." In a place where people generally respect the scribes, the word "beware" will surprise them; and when Jesus says that they "devour widows' houses," that will probably sound inflammatory. How is it so? Because as the scribes teach, they teach law; and the law is about being all in. If you're really going to love God, you're going to love Him with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, all your mind ... and a healthy chunk of your assets. If that's the scribe's theology, then you're not off the hook with offerings because of a death in the family: you don't want to give the impression that you love, say, food and shelter more than God, do you?

Almost certainly, too, the scribes are teaching a theology of glory: as we defined it a few weeks back, a theology of glory says that God is at work where you see glorious things happening, and God is not at work where do not see glorious things happening. If that's your theology, then it's obvious that God is helping out the scribe and ignoring the widow. Why? According to a theology of glory, this must be because the scribe really loves the Lord, while the widow apparently doesn't love Him enough. And how might a widow prove that she loves the Lord a lot? She could ... try giving more to support the scribes. Just sayin'.

Yecch. No wonder Jesus says, "Beware." The scribes impoverish widows and cover up their greed with long prayers that make them sound pious. According to Jesus, it's not good to be a scribe. In fact, He says they will receive the "greater condemnation."

And what does Jesus say of widows? As He sits and watches the temple treasury, many put offerings into the offering box. Many wealthy drop in large sums because they can. Then comes a poor widow who drops in two half-pennies. It's not going to keep the lights on at the temple. It's probably not enough to pay for one sacrificial pigeon. But what does Jesus say? He says, "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."

That's worth some meditation right there. For one thing, Jesus is not about schmoozing with the wealthy for big donations. He's looking at souls, not bank accounts. Therefore, His measure of an offering is along the lines of not how much people give, but how much they have left after giving: that's a better measure both of love and of trust in God. For another, we'd note that He doesn't criticize the wealthy as if their offerings were insufficient: He's not trying to foment class warfare. Rather He's trying to teach about how a heart might respond to God's love and gifts. We should also note that, even though those offerings are going to be misused in support of the scribes, He doesn't criticize the widow. He simply notes that from her viewpoint, she is giving an offering to the Lord. She gives all that she has to live on, because she trusts that life and every good gift comes from God.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus has this way of turning the world upside down. This is no different: where people admire the scribes and pass by widows, Jesus warns of scribes and praises the widow. He declares that the scribes are acting contrary to God's will and Word, while He praises the widow for her response to His goodness. It's not about class, it's not about rich vs. poor, or man vs. woman. This is about doctrine and faith: one trusts in the Lord, and the other abuses the Lord's name.

Jesus' warnings about scribes may seem like a stretch on His part, but ... it's only Tuesday. Just wait three days and it will be more obvious. That will be Friday, and on that Friday, He'll be crucified. As He hangs on that cross – as the incarnate Son of God is gasping and bleeding and dying, who is mocking Him and cheering His execution? It's the scribes: not because He provoked them with His criticism earlier in the week, but because He accurately described the condition of their soul. Take their sins and add them together: if being a scribe is all about keeping the law, teaching the law, living a glorious life and urging others to do the same, then you have no room for a messiah who teaches repentance, forgiveness, humility and servanthood.

If that's not bad enough, the scribes have already been exposed that day by – would you believe? – Pontius Pilate. It's Pilate who, in a desperate attempt to spare Jesus, offers the crowd the choice of releasing Barabbas or Jesus. Who do you want living next door: a violent criminal who will probably bring the wrath of the Roman Empire down on your neighborhood, or the One who heals the sick, feeds the hungry and generally looks out for the fatherless and the widow? The choice is obvious: free the innocent miracle-worker!

But who urges the crowd to call for Barabbas? Yup. It's the scribes.

On the other hand, there's at least one widow on Calvary: Joseph is long disappeared from the pages of Scripture, but there's Mary, the mother of Jesus. There, the scribes are busy devouring her house as they destroy her firstborn Son. There, she loses more than two half-pennies in service to the Lord: she watches her Son – the Lord – be crucified for the sins of the world.

Many would look and say that, on Calvary, the scribes have the upper hand. You, on the other hand, remember that Mary is the one called blessed through all generations.

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What shall we do with this text about scribes and widows? Jesus' words are still most relevant today. The starkest example might be in Africa: for while it's the continent on which you'll find the most Lutherans these days, I'm told that many of the fastest-growing churches there are those which preach a prosperity gospel – something along the lines of, "The more you love Jesus, the richer you become." When it comes to Africa, one tends to think more of poverty than prosperity, but that is why a prosperity gospel thrives: the poor see a wealthy preacher who preaches that if they love God enough and do enough for Him, then they will be blessed with wealth and prosperity too; and naturally, says the prosperity preacher, a good first step to loving God more – go figure – is to send offerings to support his ministry. Those in severe poverty are quite desperate to have more, and so they are often the most likely to send in offerings that they cannot afford to a preacher who is only feathering his own nest. This plays out in our country too with far too many televangelist types who prey on the desperate. Scribes still devour widows' houses quite blatantly even today.

But Africa is far away from Boise, I don't think anyone will mistake me for a televangelist (I simply don't have the hair for it), and it is given to me to apply this Word of truth about scribes and widows, wealth and poverty to you. It's sort of a curious text to apply. I can't help but think of a news report that the Credit Suisse Research Institute just released their 2018 Global Wealth Report about a week ago. If the numbers are to be trusted, it's rather startling: to be in the top ten percent of the wealthy worldwide, you need to have net assets of \$93,170. To be in the top half of the wealthy in the world, you need a grand total of net assets equaling \$4,210.

Now, I haven't done much in the way of investigating, and I make it a point to be as blind to incomes as possible and not to know what anybody puts in the offering plate. But it's rather startling: given those numbers, it's a fair bet that I am the pastor to some of the wealthiest people in the world. By which I mean all of you.

This would seem then to be a great time for a stewardship sermon, to say something like, "You know, Jesus praised the woman who gave everything she had."

At which point, you might cleverly respond, "You know, He also warned against the guy who wears a long robe and talks a lot."

Well played.

As long as I've mentioned stewardship, we do have a voters' meeting in a couple of weeks' time to approve next year's budget; and once again, thanks be to God for His blessings upon this congregation. Churches will have years of famine and years of plenty; we've had some years where we confronted some serious debt, where difficult decisions had to be made – and the Lord was faithful. We've more recently had some years where we've been able to make our budget, increase mission support, and make much-needed repairs and improvements; and the Lord has been faithful.

I bring this up because in both situations, the confession of this congregation – what we teach and believe – hasn't changed. In years of famine or loss for a congregation, it's tempting to think that we must change what we teach. In years of plenty, it's tempting to think that God must like us better now than He did before. Neither is true: these years of plenty will not last forever. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away: blessed be the name of the Lord.

Our current situation does free you from a flurry of stewardship sermons or – horrors! – a campaign. That may be a good thing or a bad thing, depending upon the individual – depending upon the temptations you face and the false gods that most appeal. When churches enjoy years of plenty, that can hurt your faith if it leads you to take offerings less seriously.

So from this text, here's what I will tell you today: the scribe's lifestyle and the widow's offering are only symptoms of faith and the condition of their hearts. Remember: this is about doctrine and faith, not class warfare or a battle of the sexes. The scribe appears as if he's living to be the model of "God helps those who help themselves," and he's showing by example that hard work and clean living pay off. There's a pretty good segment of American Christianity where he'd fit in quite well; but while that might be a decent philosophy for living, it's dangerous to faith. He trusts in himself far more than the Lord and His Word, and we know this because the Lord says as much. The widow puts all of her trust in God and demonstrates that by her offering; and we know she puts her trust in the Lord not because of her offering, but because He says so.

Thus their attitudes toward lifestyle and money are shaped by the faith that they have or don't have, at least as much as they're shaped by the possessions they have or don't have. The message is not "scribes – bad, widows – good:" there will be scribes who believe in Christ and live a life of faith, and there will be widows who reject Him and act accordingly.

So this is what I bid you today: examine yourselves for all those sins that undermine and erode your faith. Beware that theology of glory that says that God is at work where glorious things are happening to fabulous people. Remember that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Run to where God promises to be at work, in His means of grace. And because He is gloriously at work to forgive sins, repent of your sins so that He might gloriously forgive you. And forgiven, go as one set free from sin, set free from all those temptations that would keep you from living as a child of God. Then, as one set free, serve others – your family, your church, your neighbor – with the prayers and resources and words and labors that the Lord has given you to use.

Beware the temptation that Jesus came to make you comfortable, for you will often be uncomfortable in an afflicted world that opposes Jesus. Rejoice, though, that Jesus came to bring you comfort: and there is no greater comfort or consolation that – whatever your grief or joy, whatever your wealth or poverty – you are a holy, beloved child of God.

There is no greater consolation than this: it's good to be forgiven. And, for the sake of Jesus, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen