

Beware of The Scribes

Mark 12:38-44

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

November 8, 2009 – Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost



Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Given the current financial climate of our age, one might expect that this morning's Gospel text would present itself as an ideal opportunity for a pastor to give his flock some sort of stewardship "pep talk." Indeed, the temptation is there to come right out and tell you that it's high time you began imitating the faith and giving of that poor widow – that you ought to give until it hurts – down to your last penny – everything you have. After all, it does appear that our Lord Christ often commends that sort of sacrificial giving. And actually, if you're like me, that kind "stewardship" approach to this text is pretty much what we're grown accustomed to hearing every time it rolls around. In fact, I began this week thinking that this was the only way to preach this text. But studying further, I began to see there was something far more complicated at work.

Now admittedly, it's natural enough to admire what this poor widow has done. She appears to be acting in faith, trusting God, and giving all she has to the Church. But while that part of the story is appealing and endearing, it actually has much more to do with what Jesus has been saying about the Scribes than it does with this poor widow and her gift. I'd like to suggest to you that here Jesus is sounding a warning about the hypocrisy and self-righteousness of these Scribes – men whose entire life was centered on impressing others and calling attention to themselves. Now, understand, the Scribes were not ordained priests, nor were they teachers like the Pharisees. Rather, they were "professional theologians," Church lawyers, if you will – responsible for maintaining the rules and regulations of the Church constitution and by-laws.

But it wasn't their position or profession that was the problem. It was their own sense of self-importance and the way they put on airs. They made a prideful show of their leadership, their attention to the details of the Law, their outward appearance, and their "superior" spirituality. In all this, they sought the praise and adoration of men, and thereby established an expectation of works righteousness in others. It was by their promotion of these attitudes that the Scribes – or at least some of them – were guilty of devouring the houses of widows. What I mean is that it doesn't appear they were engaged in the outright theft of the property of widows. Instead,

as legal trustees of a widow's property, it's probably more likely that they had been making charitable contributions which weren't in the widow's best interests. And I suspect this is very thing our Lord is pointing to in this case of the poor widow and her mite.

In the Old Testament, over and over again, God makes it clear that His people are to care for widows and orphans above all, because our Lord Himself is the Husband and Father of all His people – who then represent Him in their care of and service to others. James also writes in his Epistle that one who has true religion will care for orphans and widows in their affliction. Thus, it should have been a distinguishing characteristic of Jewish piety that widows be provided for. The Scribes however – by their words, actions, expectations and example – led these poor widows to feel like they had to contribute their only livelihood to the care and upkeep of the Temple.

And is that not what today's Gospel says – that the wealthier members of the community were more than able to provide for all that was needed? In fact, indications are that the Temple treasury was abundantly filled to overflowing! And while our Lord does hold up the example of this poor woman, the real point is the striking contrast between this widow, who should properly have been on the receiving end of help and service from the people and Temple of God, and the Scribes who were mostly interested in receiving the attention, admiration, and adulation of others. Perhaps you might remember what first prompted Luther into action at the beginning of the Reformation. It was the selling of indulgences. Under the authority of the Pope, the forgiveness of sins was put up for sale, and the purchasing of indulgences was considered a good work because the proceeds from this marketing scheme were to be used to build St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. It was precisely for that reason that Luther not only criticized the whole theological poverty behind the notion of indulgences, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the way in which the poor of Germany were being pressed financially into supporting a building for the wealthy people of Rome. Rather than being served, they were pressured into sacrifice.

In our own day, too, it's quite common to hear stories of televangelists or unscrupulous pastors who've persuaded some poor widow or widower to contribute

their entire life savings in support of some so-called “ministry.” And I suspect each of you could also come up with other examples of the many ways in which pious, well-meaning, faithful people are led to give even beyond their ability in the interest of some religious or charitable cause. And quite typically there’s often an unspoken understanding that, by giving to such a cause, one will thereby gain for themselves some special blessing from God. But do we not fall into that same trap when we become focused on the preservation of a Church building or institution for its own sake, rather than placing our faith and trust solely upon the Lord God Himself and the Ministry of the Gospel? How easy it is to get wrapped up in the idea that it’s all about us – about our Church, our congregation, our programs, our problems, our building, our Synod, or whatever. The kind of superficiality which focuses on outward appearances and human structures is the very works righteousness which Jesus criticized in the Scribes – and which led to the sort of situation in which this poor widow felt she had to give up everything to support the Temple.

Now, don’t get me wrong. The Temple and its sacrificial liturgy were a means of grace established by God, whereby He served and provided for His people. But that was the key. It was through these means of grace and His Divine Service that God provided for His people. It wasn’t what the people did for God, much less for themselves. Their support of the Temple was supposed to be a response to God’s grace, not a way to earn God’s favor. Their focus should have been on God’s Word rather than on their own gifts and sacrifices.

And the same is true today. You and I, we do have an obligation and responsibility to support the Church on earth in proportion to the measure wherewith God has blessed us. And our congregation does need your support if its work is to continue. So, *do* give whatever you are able – but not just to preserve this building, or even to preserve the Missouri Synod as such. Rather, give what you can for the sake of the ministry of the Gospel here in this place and all around the world – and for the sake of what God is here doing in Christ Jesus for you, your family, and all who come here to receive His amazing gifts of life and salvation. Give what you can, not to obtain some benefit from God, but as your sacrifice of faith and thanksgiving.

Guard yourself steadfastly against the temptation to focus on human structures and their outward appearances. And don’t kid yourself that you can easily tell the difference. Even Jesus’ disciples were caught up in the impressive beauty of the Temple. See how quickly

their eyes turned from the example of this poor widow to how noble, good and right it was that everyone should support that proud monument of the Jewish people and their religion. Just as you and I might also easily be led to admire and be proud of our beautiful church – which is indeed a tribute to the piety and devotion of the people of God here in this place – we must also remember that the Temple was ultimately destroyed, along with the entire city of Jerusalem.

But was the destruction of the Lord’s House and His Holy City the end of His Church? The end of His Gospel? The end of His forgiveness, life and salvation? The end of His chosen people and their hope? Of course not! After all, our Lord Himself promised that even after everything else had passed away, His Word would remain forever. He’s the One who established the Holy Supper of His very own body and blood which has become the new, divine, eternal Temple of the Living God. It was His Sacrifice on the cross that accomplished the forgiveness of our sins, so that no other sacrifice remains except for the sacrifice of faith and thanksgiving in response to His gifts of life and salvation.

Dear friends, the Temple of Christ’s body and blood, His gracious gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation, are now here for you – not because of this building, nor even because of the faithful people of Trinity past and present – but because of the Lord and His faithfulness – because of His grace and mercy toward you – because of His Word and Holy Spirit – because of His preaching of the Gospel – because of His Baptizing and absolving sinners – and because here He feeds you with the medicine of immortality. It is true that our Lord uses your gifts to provide this place for your benefit, but don’t ever suppose He’s depending solely on you to support Him. And don’t ever think that the Gospel and God’s gifts are in any way contingent upon us and our sacrifices. Rather, live by faith, knowing that He who created you and all things and still preserves them – who suffered, died and rose for you so that you might live with Him in His Kingdom forever – who has caused His Word and Sacraments to be faithfully preached and administered to us and many others here in this place – and in many other places all around the world – will, for the sake of His own love and faithfulness, continue to strengthen and keep you steadfast in that true faith unto life everlasting. God *will* grant it for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.