A Litmus Test of True Religion

Luke 20:45-21:4

December 31, 2023

Turn in your Bibles to Luke 20 and verse 45, and we are at the end of this amazing chapter, a chapter that has really been marked by controversy and conflict, and yet has been so instructive and useful and beneficial for us. But we are turning the page from chapter 20 into chapter 21 today.

And in the text before us, it's a text that gives us a litmus test of sorts, kind of an unlikely litmus test, but a litmus test, that tests the legitimacy of any and every religion. It really does go down into the heart of every individual, every individual worshipper. Every one of us is a religious soul created by God to be religious, to think religiously; and so this text really does drive into the heart of how we think. It gets to the heart of our religion and our religious life.

We're actually going to look at two accounts this morning, and in our Bibles, these two accounts are divided by a chapter break going from chapter 20 into chapter 21. That may be a little bit unfortunate, but we'll get by. Just ignore the numbers and pay attention to the content because Luke intended these two accounts to be read together. From chapter 20 verse 45 through chapter 21, verse 4, these two accounts are going to be read together.

That's how we're going to read them to get the impact that Luke intended us to get, and we can learn the lesson that Jesus is trying to teach his disciples, here, as well, because Jesus is really providing his disciples, as I said, with a litmus test to test the legitimacy of religion, to test the legitimacy of one's own practice of religion.

Let me give you that litmus test right up front. Here's the test: How does your religion treat the weakest and the most vulnerable members of society? How does your religion treat the weakest and most vulnerable members of society? And you might just apply this personally. "How do I think about the weakest and the most vulnerable members of my society? How do I think about them? Do I notice them, or do I pass by unaware?"

If we apply this litmus test to our own culture and our own time, the religion of our country, whatever it is, we can tell that our religion is pretty sick with the way the religion of our country treats children as prey for predatory adults; the way the religion of our country, whatever that is, however you characterize that, the way it abuses and uses women, the way it ignores the elderly, the way it treats the widows.

We can see in our time all attention is focused on the young. All attention is focused on the ambitious and the energetic, those who produce, those who do stuff, those who are noticed. And I do wonder, I often wonder this, if the spirit of our age, a spirit that really is active in every age of human history, I wonder if the spirit of our age hasn't taken some hold on our own hearts as well.

It's James, the half-brother of our Lord, who boiled down this litmus test in James 1:27, "Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Mercy and holiness. How you doing? How are you doing in your compassion for the orphans and the widows, or you could just say the most vulnerable and the weakest members of society? Where is your heart of compassion? Where is your mercy toward

them? "In keeping yourself unstained by the world," how is your holiness? Do you count it a virtue to keep yourself unstained by the world, to separate from the world? Or do you count that as of minimal importance in your life, you condemn it as, oh, just so much quaint pietism of the past that has infected our evangelical time?

Don't neglect the litmus test that James lays down in James 1:27. We're going to focus, though, on the first part of that litmus test that he gave, the need to look after orphans and widows in their distress. How does our religion treat the weak and the vulnerable members of society, as James says, the orphans and the widows? That is the test of legitimacy. That is the litmus test of true or false religion.

Keep that in your mind, and the plight of the widow in particular, as we read the two accounts before us, starting in Luke 20, verse 45, "And in the hearing of all the people, he said to his disciples, 'Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honor at the feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.' Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering

box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins, and he said, 'Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, for they contributed out of their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she had to live on.'"

How does Israel's religion at this time treat the widows? In the first account, we see the heart of false religion exposed in its hypocrisy. So we're going to focus on the heart of false religion in the first point, today, and then we're going to see the fruit of false religion in the way that it devours the life of the widow. That's what comes in the second account. So the first point, the heart of false religion; the second point the fruit of false religion.

Let's talk first about the heart of false religion, which is the end of chapter 20, verses 45-47. Luke tells us in verse 45 Jesus is directing his attention to his disciples. Okay, he's still speaking in the hearing of all the people. He's still in the temple complex. That's been the setting since verse 1 of this chapter, in fact since chapter 19 when he went in and cleared the temple. The focus is all on the temple. Jesus has gone in, cleaned house, cleared everything out, and he's set up his teaching ministry right there in the temple. So he's there in the hearing of all the people. He's in the temple complex,

and he has his disciples around them, and he wants them to pay attention to a particular lesson.

Luke's account is like Mark's in that the two are an abbreviated form of all that happened at this time, and the fuller condemnation of the scribes we can read in Matthew chapter 23. If you'd like to turn there, you can, because I'm going to read a few verses from that chapter. Matthew 23, the entire chapter, is taken up with what goes on in Luke 20, verses 45-47. In Matthew 23, Matthew devotes an entire chapter to unpack all that Jesus said on this occasion. We just get the abbreviated form, but we're going to fill it in with some of what Jesus said at that time.

Matthew 23 verses 1-12, "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples." Luke helps us to see that Jesus has a particular thing he wants his disciples to notice, but Jesus is speaking to all the crowds and to his disciples. Matthew 23 verse 2, "'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. So practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do. For they preach but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves aren't willing to move them with their little finger.

"'They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at the feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces, and being called rabbi by others. But you're not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you're all brothers. And call no man father on earth. For you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors,'" or leaders is another word there, "'for you have one leader, one instructor, who is the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant, and whoever exalts himself will be humbled; whoever humbles himself will be exalted.'" And then from there Jesus goes on to pronounce woes upon "'the scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!'"

After this instruction here in verse 1, "Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples," he then turns and addresses the hypocrites: the scribes and the Pharisees. He addresses them directly in the second person. He says, "'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites.'" It's a pattern throughout the rest of that chapter. Seven times he condemns the scribes and the Pharisees with these incisive observations of the falsity of their religion, this searing, prophetic voice that he speaks with, flaying them open, cutting them open, and baring all to everyone.

And he pronounces upon them judgments of woe six times after identifying them as scribes and Pharisees. Six times he calls them hypocrites and one of those times he varies that pattern of invective, and he calls them blind guides in verse 15. Blind guides, meaning, Listen, everyone, they're blind guides, if you want to fall into a ditch, follow them. If you want to walk off a cliff, keep on going, follow them. He's signaling a warning to the crowds, a warning to his disciples. Do not follow them. They're respected, they're regarded, they're highly esteemed, they're made much of. Turn away from them. They are going to get you killed.

At the end of the chapter of woe, Matthew 23, this condemnation and it is heavy, and it is direct. It's bold, and it leaves no wiggle room, no place for them to escape. At the end of this condemnation of the Jewish religious leadership, the religious establishment in Jerusalem, at the very place where he's standing, he looks around in a 360° lens and says, all of this is corrupt.

And then he comes to the end of that. Look at Matthew 23. If you're still there, look in verse 37, and he expresses this profound grief, this lament, "'Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to

it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not,'" that is you wouldn't allow it, "'See, your house is left you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."'"

Now take that thought and go back to Luke chapter 20. So go back to Luke 20:45-47. Keep that larger context, that fuller context, in mind, because that is the heart of our Lord. It's exposed more thoroughly in Matthew's Gospel than in Luke's. And realize that what he says there in Matthew 23, all that he unpacks and what happens here, by the way, this is what sets the scene and sets the context for the entire Olivet discourse to come. We're going to come back to that in weeks to come. But everything that he says there, this condemnation of the religion around him, the religion that everybody has lived in, the leaders that they all respected, the people that were held up as examples for them to follow, all of this, it's coming down. It's all coming down.

As we return to Luke 20, we might wonder why Luke didn't record the fuller account, why he didn't put more in of that condemnation, Jesus condemning the Jewish religious leadership more like maybe Matthew did. It's a good question, and there are

a couple reasons Luke has abbreviated his account. He's intentional in that. He knows it's there. It's not that it's unimportant; it's just not fitting his purpose. First of all, we realize that Luke has already covered Jesus' condemnation of the Jewish religious leadership back, in full, in Luke 11:37-52. In fact, if you compare Luke 11:37-52, you can see that it corresponds very well to Matthew 23. Most of the points that are covered in Luke 11 are covered in Matthew 23 as well.

What he says in Luke 11 happened earlier in his ministry, different place, different occasion. It was, as you may remember, it happened in the house of a Pharisee. He was invited to dinner, and at the dinner table he let loose. It made for a very uncomfortable conversation around the dinner table. Jesus pronounced in that occasion not seven judgments of woe, but six judgments of woe upon the Pharisees. And the scribes said, hey, Jesus, when you say that, you know, you kind of offend us, too. He said, oh, well, let me turn something your way! Woe to you scribes, too! So Luke has already covered this material.

But secondly, he has another purpose in mind. Because since Luke covered the ground already of condemnation of Israel's leadership, he now has the freedom to draw out an additional point that Jesus made on this occasion. And if Luke were to

include all that Matthew included and recorded in chapter 23 of Matthew, there would be too much separation between Luke 20:47 and Luke 21:1. And Luke does not want that separation to exist. He's made a literary decision here to structure his Gospel in this way, to include this abbreviated account of condemnation of the scribes and their religion, the heart of false religion, and then to show immediately the case in point, to show the fruit of false religion. So he includes this account about the widow giving at the temple, and he keeps it connected to the previous account about Israel's religion. He structures the narrative in this way so Luke can show us what else Jesus taught his disciples that day, and that is something Matthew doesn't record.

So verse 45, "In the hearing of all the people, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Beware of the scribes.'" He said this on several occasions. Beware. Watch out. Look out for them. Take heed. Beware. And why must they beware? Skip to the end and look at the conclusion, verse 47, "'because,'" end of verse 47, "'they will receive the greater condemnation.'" In other words, contrary to what they expected, contrary to what they assumed to be true, these scribes, these most esteemed scholars and theologians of their society, they're all going to hell. That's what he means by "the greater condemnation."

They're not just going to hell. They will be assigned the very darkest place in hell, the lowest place in hell, suffering the greatest torment of all those who are God-hating, Christ-rejecting sinners. They're the worst of the worst. Contrary to your judgment, contrary to the way things seem to you, they're not just misguided guys." Think about it, pornographers, pedophiles, human traffickers, cartel members, homicidal genocidal dictators, bloodthirsty terrorists, ruthless, ambitious politicians who have sold their souls to the devil and would step over their own grandmother to get ahead, below all of them, below them, in the darkest bowels, in the depths of hell, that space is reserved for those whom Christ condemns with the harshest language he ever used. The religious hypocrites, in this case, the scribes, Jesus says, "They will receive the greater condemnation." It's shocking.

It is shocking to their sensibilities and listen, frankly, it's shocking to ours. These scribes, the grammateus, experts in the Mosaic law, scholars of theology, teachers of doctrine. In fact, that's another name for them, n*omodidaskaloi*, literally, law teachers. These men were well-trained. They're tested men, lettered men, credentialed with deep familiarity in the word of God. It's because they're so well trained that they were able to elevate into positions of power and authority. They provided

theological horsepower behind the Pharisees, also for the chief priests who were Sadducees, but mostly for the theologically conservative Pharisees, those who were more popular, more highly esteemed among the people. Behind them were the scribes, giving them strength to their positions, informing their positions through biblical study.

From the Lord's description, what motivated them is what incurred their condemnation. The scribes loved the praises of men. Rather than the approval and the praise of God, they loved the praises of men. They loved to be esteemed by people, well thought of by people. They didn't fear God, and that's the one whose word that they spent so much time and effort in studying. They trained so hard to get deep and study and know and understand.

But why did they do that? Rather than loving God in their hearts, rather than fearing him, rather than seeking to know him that they might worship him and obey him with their lives, they really loved themselves. Not everybody who goes to seminary, not everybody who studies the Bible, not everybody who writes books, not everybody who speaks at conferences, not everybody who pastors churches is doing so for the right motives.

We'll break this section down, Jesus' condemnation of the heart of their religion, break it down in several subpoints. These become reasons that the Lord is condemning the scribes. These become warnings for us not to follow after them, actually to notice the same kinds of sins that could be resident within our own hearts and to turn away, to expose those sins because we've all got them. The scribes are condemned, we can say this, for what they want, when and where they want it, what they'll do to get it, and then the damning result of what they want, the damning result of what they get.

Well, sub-point A: The scribes are condemned for what they want. The scribes are condemned for what they want. And this really does get to the heart of their religion, summarized in verse 46, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and they love greetings in the marketplace, the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honor at the feasts." So what they want is revealed in what they like. What they want is revealed in what they love.

They like to walk around in long robes. What is that a bathrobe? I mean, is this, you know, something like a cape you might see a superhero in, or a Harry Potter thing or whatever? No, this is referring to the long outer garment that's worn by

the scribes. It was kind of a reward for their position. So it was long outer garment. It was expensive. It was ornate. One commentator describes it as "a resplendent academic or clerical garb."

I see these at graduations, you know, as everybody's up on the platform, and you see the scholars in their gowns, right? Now, we understand in ceremonial, honorary kind of things like that that people dress up in those gowns, and they confer degrees on people. But can you imagine that guy walking down and just kind of wearing that out in public, wearing that to the mall? We would count that as strange because we've learned from Scripture that that kind of show of ostentation is the very heart of hypocrisy exposed, you know, writ large. So we don't do that. We've become better at masking our hypocrisy.

But in their day, wearing this ostentatious attention-getting clothing and then going out in public and walking around, this is guaranteeing that they would be noticed for who they are, what they are. It guarantees they'd attract attention, for sure. The clothing that they wore signaled their importance. It signaled their clout, the weight that they carried in their person. It elicited from the people the esteem that they so desperately wanted. It's sad, isn't it?

They like to walk around in long robes. Why? Because they love greetings. They love the best place, the best seats. They love the places of honor. That's what they love. Three things. They love greetings, the best seats, and the places of honor. Sum it up by saying they love deference and respect. It gives them places of privilege and public esteem, which gives them more respect, more esteem.

The greeting is not just a polite, hello. I mean, it's not just talking about how they like people to be friendly to them. That's not the issue here. We can fill the detail in with Matthew's more expansive explanation. The greeting that they love, they love to be called Rabbi. Rabbi, that's a loan word that's translated from the Hebrew into the Greek. It literally means rabbi, *rab* meaning great. And the suffix is a is a first-person suffix. It literally means, my great one. So it's not just *rab,* great one, but it's *rabbei*, my great one. It's not just, you're great, but you're great and I acknowledge it. And you're my great one. Rabbi, reserved for not just a teacher of the law, but an outstanding teacher.

They love to be called Father. Father, this is from Matthew 23 again, "They love to be called Father." That's a title that referred to the protecting, providing, you could say

progenerating effect of the teaching of the scribes. That's how they wanted to be thought of. I mean, they really esteemed their own teaching and wanted everybody else to esteem their teaching as well. This goes way beyond encouraging the preacher, way beyond just giving him a pat on the back and saying, hey, thanks for that lesson, thanks for that sermon. That's not what we're talking about here. What they wanted is something like this: oh, Father! Oh, Rabbi! like, I'm in awe in your presence, and I'm safe because you're my father. Your teaching is my very food, my sustenance, my life. In fact, without your teaching, Rabbi, Father, I wouldn't have been brought into this world. I'd have no life.

Oh, they wanted to hear stuff like that. They loved to be called leader. They loved to be called teacher. The word in Matthew is *kathegetes*, from the verb *kathegetomai,* means, to lead the way, to instruct in the way. So scribes wanted to be noticed by the people around them. They wanted the people to see them, regard them, fawn all over them as their true leaders.

Again, they were the theological mind and the brains behind the Pharisees. So the Pharisees were out in front, or the Sadducees, in the case of the chief priests at the temple. They're out in front. They're the ones with kind of the public

positions; but the scribes, they really longed for that prominence, but their scholarly, academic minds meant that most of the common people didn't really understand what they were talking about. So they're kind of behind the scenes a little bit. They really wanted to be out in front. They wanted everybody to say, you know what? We understand. The Pharisees are, you know, really big, important guys, but they stand on your shoulders. You're really the brains of the operation. You're really the power and the strength in their public ministries. They're propped up on you.

Oh, they wanted to be the leader. They wanted to be the teacher. They wanted to be the father and the rabbi, the most elevated of instructors, guides to the blind, instructors of the simple. That's all what's behind them dressing up in these fancy robes, drawing attention to themselves. They wanted to guarantee being noticed by others, and according to the system of honor and shame in their culture, they wanted to get for themselves the esteem that they craved, acknowledgement of their greatness by getting the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at the feasts.

Now Luke has already recorded Jesus' confrontation in the same kind of distorted love of praise back in Luke 14. He

noticed back there how they all were invited to the banquet and they all chose the best seats, the places of honor for themselves at the banquets in these celebratory events. They wanted to be noticed. They wanted to be seen as something special, recognized for their great scholarship, their erudition, their brilliance, to be praised and honored by the important and the wealthy. So what do they want? They want public recognition, public acclaim, praise, esteem.

Sub-point B: The scribes are condemned not just for what they want, but they're condemned for where and when they want this esteem. They want to be recognized, notice, praise, verse 46, in every public place, on every public occasion, and in every setting. They don't want anything small. Just they want it all, right? They want to be praised in the marketplace. So while people go out shopping, while they're out and about, while they're doing regular, mundane chores of life, they want to be noticed as something great out there. And they want to be noticed in the synagogues as well, and that's a religious setting. So you've got a profane setting and a sacred setting, where religious instruction takes place, where they can really shine and show off their skills and show off their exegetical skill, flaunt their knowledge of God, their knowledge of his word.

The best seats in the synagogue referred to, we've been through this a number of times in Luke, but the best seats in the synagogue are those in front of the raised platform. Synagogue leaders came, read Scripture, prayers were offered and prayed. A teacher would sit down on the platform and then expound the Scriptures, give an exposition like I'm giving right now. But below them, right in front of them, seated facing the audience, would be the scribes. Those are the best seats. What's that optic that they're after? They want to be seen as those who are in authority, that all who are officiating the service in the synagogue, all who are conducting the different functions of the synagogue, they do so under the watchful eye and under the scholarly scrutiny of the scribes.

So insidious isn't it, to mask such profane desires within the sacred assembly, to use the church that way? They want to be praised in the marketplace. It's a profane setting. They want to be noticed in the synagogue, that's a sacred setting. They also want to be elevated at the feasts. They want to sit in places of honor at banquets, public events, on celebratory occasions. They love to be seen as somebody, as one to be regarded because this wealthy host, whoever called this feast or organized this banquet, has placed them at his right hand, and there at his right hand, they will be seen as being part of the inner circle,

where all the really important conversation is happening, where all the important decisions are made.

So whether in the marketplace or at the synagogue or at the banquets, whether the occasion is mundane and common, or religious and sacred, or celebratory and dignifying, the scribes craved attention and esteem and recognition. And this desire of theirs, by the way, it never takes a rest. This is an insatiable desire. It's an unrelenting drive for public acknowledgement and praise and constant attention. And that is the textbook definition for enslaving idolatry. They can't stop craving that esteem, and that attention. Can’t stop. The more they get, the more they want.

Two more subpoints in this little exposé of the scribes. Sub-point C: The scribes are condemned for what they're willing to do to get what they want, and sub-point D: They're condemned also for the consequences of getting what they want. Jesus says this in verse 47, that “they devour widows’ houses,” that's the consequence, “and for a pretense make long prayers,” that's what they do to get what they want. Verse 47, the points there are separated from the previous points in verse 46. But in verse 47 these two points, devouring widows’ houses for pretense, making

long prayers, those two points are joined together, and so they're part and parcel of one another.

In other words, the scribes, here, are making a show of piety and praying these long prayers in order to devour widows' houses. They're joined together. To get what they want, they use a show of devotion to God, an external display of personal piety, godliness, a pretense of godliness through praying these long-winded prayers. And we understand, too, that their prayers, they'll be filled in through what? Theology, Bible exposition. I mean, they'll be rich in content, but they will lack the heart of a true worshipper, because they are unregenerate men. They put on this display publicly, not out of a desire to commune with God, a God whom they do not know. They do this, rather, to keep up appearances, so they can get their hands into the widows' purses, so they can get their hands on the property of widows.

You say, what's the connection? How do they do that? Well, I'm so glad you asked. Unlike the Pharisees, they are a class of wealthy businessmen, the Pharisees. Unlike the Sadducees, who were, again, an aristocratic class, members of an aristocracy, many of them related to the high-priestly family, the scribes were not in and of themselves, inherently wealthy. Leon Morris

says this, he says, "It was forbidden for scribes to accept money for teaching. They must, and they did make their knowledge available without charge. But there was nothing to stop people from making gifts to teachers. And this, the gifts, it was regarded as meritorious.

Another commentator says this, that "scribes were dependent for their livelihood on gifts of worshippers and benefactors." Well, that starts to shape our thinking, here, doesn't it? As unregenerate Bible teachers, as unregenerate theologians, as unregenerate scholars of Scripture with bad motives, they used whatever they had, to get what it was that they wanted. They sought gifts from those with means, and they did so by ingratiating themselves through this external show of religion and piety and godliness.

Some say the scribes ingratiated themselves to pious, weak, wealthy widows, accepting hospitality and rich presents and gifts from them. Long biblical prayers provided the cover they needed to present themselves as godly, and the widows were taken in. Come here, preacher boy. Just let me put a little something in your pocket. It's kind of like that.

Others say that the scribes, because of their study, their education, because of their ability with texts and with

recording, and all those kind of things, they were able to act as lawyers, and they did. Many of them were called lawyers, teachers of the law and lawyers, and so they would sometimes charge widows exorbitant rates for legal advice.

Others say the property of widows, property that had been dedicated to the temple, was then entrusted to the care of scribes for management. And so the prayers created this illusion of trustworthiness that would induce either the widows or the families of widows to appoint them as trustees, to see them as trustworthy men, people who could be regarded, relied upon. Once they took on the role of a trustee, they could jack up their remuneration rates, where they could skim off the proceeds of sales or investment interest. All that was happening.

Still another way to explain verse 47 is that the scribes, by these long flowery prayers, induced wealthy widows to donate their estates, or a large percentage of their estates, to the temple. The influence, the involvement of the scribes in this kind of twisted donor development program made them essential to the chief priests and the Sadducees. And the chief priests and Sadducees elevated scribal status, ensured their provision, made sure they were well taken care of because of what they were bringing in.

However it happened that they were doing this, devouring widows' houses, they were covering all their wicked designs with religion. It's disgusting, making a show of godliness for personal gain. And the longer the prayer, the more trustworthy they appeared, the more business they generated, the more they preyed upon trusting widows. And so the consequence of their pretense and their hypocrisy is to devour the widow, to take advantage of the society's most vulnerable citizens.

The word devour is the word, to eat, *esthio*, intensified with the prefix kata. So *katesthio*, it means to eat up, consume, or you might use the more picturesque translation, to wolf down. Without calling them ravenous wolves, Jesus just described them as ravenous wolves. In fact, without using the word, hypocrites, Jesus just described them as hypocrites, and this is the cruel result of their hypocrisy. These are the consequences of their false piety. Their love of esteem and praise is not harmless. It is cruel. It is rapacious. It is wicked. It's brutal. It's just taking a bite at a time, over a long period of time, and eventually you don't notice, the widow's gone. The abhorrent nature of the evil in all this is they're willing to use God as a cover. They're willing to use God and godliness to rob the weak and the vulnerable, to join God in his holiness and his majesty and his goodness and his grace and his mercy. He has

nothing to do with this, and they take that and join it to corruption and greed.

I tell you, that's what I hate the most about the false religion I see around us today. I recently had the occasion, and it was not a pleasant occasion, but I had to review some false teaching of a false teacher. And his wife actually got up and preached in this video I was seeing, and the wife is whooping up the crowd, slaying everybody in the spirit. They fell down and convulsed on the floor and had big, burly guys, you know, catching them and laying them down the floor. And I was thinking, If the Holy Spirit is in that, couldn't he provide some kind of a Holy Spirit cushion on the bottom so they don't hit their head? No. Big, burly guys laying them down. They convulse on the floor and break out in this hysterical laughter, like they're drunk. It was horrible to watch.

And after this going on and on, and the music whipping up the crowd, and this happening, eventually she had to settle everybody down so she could preach the good news. You know the gospel that she preached? Honestly, if any of the really weak churches around our area, and you know them, if any of them preach the gospel that she preached in their pulpits, we'd say, Huh! We might want to give that church another look. Maybe

they're a little closer to us than we thought. We can be encouraged by that.

You know what makes me so angry about that? She's taking words like substitutionary atonement and sin and judgment and repentance and all those things, and joining it together with absolute evil and wickedness from the devil himself. Oh, the devil loves to join the good with the evil. Oh, he loves to confuse people, thinking that they've got a form and substance of religion, when actually, it is corrupt to the core.

Do not be fooled, beloved. Don't let your friends and loved ones be fooled. These people are not harmless. They're ravenous wolves. Paul said, "They imagine godliness as a means of gain. And for such men, for such women, their condemnation is just." Jesus says, "They will receive the greater condemnation," and that is to refer to the lowest, darkest place in a painful, eternal hell. The heart of false religion is hypocrisy. It's using religion to mask a heart of greed, to mask an idolatry, to pretend, it's pretending to worship God, all the while serving the idol of the self. That is ugly.

And as we pivot into the second account, we're going to see the effect of false religion in a case study before us. So number two, we talked about the heart of false religion; point

number two is the fruit of false religion. The fruit of false religion. Luke tells us in chapter 21 verse 1 that "Jesus looked up," which means he'd been looking down, he'd been sitting down. We can imagine Jesus on this occasion at this particular point in time that he's feeling a bit weary and not only because of the confrontations that he's had throughout that entire chapter with all these various groups: Pharisees, scribes, Herodians, Sadducees. All those people have come to challenge him about his use of authority in the temple, as he cleared the temple and started teaching, set up his teaching ministry, he's been dealing with them all day, and that is wearying in and of itself.

But remember, as we read from Matthew's account, Jesus had just called down condemnation, denouncing the scribes and the Pharisees as hypocrites with seven woes. He just lambasted the entire system, just condemned the entire thing. And at the end of that great chapter in Matthew 23, he laments over the certain fate of the city. "Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem!" I've read this story before. I've seen this movie time and time again, and it's got the same ending. It's going to end in your judgement.

He pronounces these woes. He doesn't walk away, strutting. He's not swaggering as he walks through the temple, like, I put

those guys in their place. No, his heart's broken. He is sad and sorrowing and listen, that takes emotional energy. It drains you to the very core to put out that much energy, do that much teaching. He is here in the temple, seeing the certain fate of the city, its coming destruction.

He is emotionally spent, exhausted, and he's taking a short break. He's sitting. He's sitting on a bench in the court of women. There in kind of the heart of the temple, you've got the court of the Gentiles, which is a much larger space and then it kind of boils down to the court of the women and the court where the men could pass through, where the sacrifices are offered. And then you go into the holy place and the holy of holies, which only the priest can go in, and the holy of holies, which the high priest can only go in once a year. Outside of that court, where the Israelite men can go, outside of that: the court of the women, where the women and children can go.

And that is where Jesus is sitting. It's a perfect vantage point for observing various groups of people who are coming in and out of that area. I don't know about you, I love to people watch. I think you do, too. We used to go to malls. Now we just go online and see shoppers at Walmart and take a look at whatever video is playing. But we love to look at various

people. And Jesus is sitting down taking a rest, and he's watching various people who are coming in and out of the court of the women, there. And he's watching them making their offerings, giving their gifts.

That's where the giving receptacles are found, is in the court of the women. That's where all the people, men, women and children, can go. It's the time of the Passover, the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, so there are lots of people thronging in and out of this place, coming and going, lots to see, lots to observe. And Luke says in verse 1, "Jesus looked up and he saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box." Offering box is the word *gazophylakion.* The Persian loan word *gazo*, which means royal treasury, that word *gazo*, royal treasury, is joined to *phylake,* which means guard or protection, so the guard or protection of the royal treasury.

That was what really characterized most ancient temples. Like most ancient temples, the Jerusalem temple was a guard for the royal treasury. It had vast stores of riches there. The temple acquired massive quantities of wealth from people's taxes, offerings, required offerings along with a lot of free-will offerings given as well by worshipers bringing valuable commodities, whether flour or oil or wine or grain. They brought

donations and coin and money and, yes, you guessed it, including the donated estates of widows.

Levites were there to oversee the temple operations since they were no longer assigned by various clans to carry the tabernacle, to set up and break down the tabernacle, carry a various accoutrements of worship, and carry the different poles and posts and pillars and all those things. They no longer did that because now they have a temple; it's in one location, they're not traveling anymore. And so now what do they do? They oversee the temple operations. They are not only the singers, but also the ones who service the temple, and they are the guards who protect the temple wealth.

Centuries of offerings, centuries of wealth accumulated at the temple. Centuries of the Levites guarding the temple's wealth. You could say that place is secured tighter than Fort Knox. You're not getting in there. This is part of what motivated the Romans in A.D. 70 to get in there and conquer Jerusalem and get into that temple, tear it apart, because they wanted to get to the treasure.

And by the way, think about the money changers, end of Luke 19, that Jesus cleared out of there. The money changers are there at the temple using the temple like a bank. They stored

individual wealth, they stored royal wealth, they stored temple wealth, they guarded treasure, and they issued loans out of this as well. This explains the entirety of chapter 20, the fact that Jesus came into the temple and disrupted all the money-making enterprises, which included banking, a very lucrative profession. As they say, want to take down any criminal enterprise? Go after the money. It is the same thing with false religion. Go after the money, trace the money.

Again, this word, *gazophylakion*, not only refers to the temple as a whole, as the guard of the treasury. It also refers to, individually, the thirteen receptacles that are placed in the court of women. Collectively, they're called the *shofaroth*. It's built off the word, *shofar*. *Shofar* is the word ram's horn. The ram's horn was used as a trumpet in war. But also these horns were then turned around, and the open end being at the top and the small end being at the bottom, and they were affixed at the top of the offering chest, and they were used to collect the offerings.

So each of these thirteen chests, chests that collect money, receptacles to collect money in the court of women, had this trumpet-shaped horn on top of it made of silver. And those trumpet-shaped horns collected the coinage, the wider part at

the top and the narrow part of the bottom affixed to the chest below. And this system of collection not only got all the money in there from the wide part of the top, but also prevented greedy little fingers like my children when they were young, reaching down into the locked chest to pilfer some coin. I don't know if you've ever had the privilege of sitting in church and watching the offering plate go around and seeing a little stubby little hand kind of reach into the plate and grab something out of it. I've seen that. So you've got to be careful.

The scene here before Jesus as he's watching, it represents this kind of this display of noise and distraction there in the temple, as people are flowing in and out, as the rich are dropping lots of coin into the silver ram's horn. Must have sounded like a jackpot of a slot machine in Las Vegas, just ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching, ching. Lots of noise, turning lots of heads, like, whoa! Let's see what he gave, drawing lots of attention.

In addition to the noise of coins hitting the silver, the offerers, when they came to certain receptacles, they had to call out the amounts and the purposes for each of their offerings. Six of the thirteen receptacles were designated for specific offerings, each sorted, then, according to purpose.

According to the Mishnah Shekalim, there were thirteen collection horns in the temple. The intended use of the funds was written upon each one as follows: new shekels, old shekels, pairs of birds, fledglings designated for burnt offerings, wood for the arrangement of the altar, frankincense that accompanied meal offerings, and gold donated for the ark cover.

All those, you know, birds or fledglings of birds or wood or frankincense or gold, those were turned into coin or money through the money changers who took that in, gave the appropriate amount of money, and then they went and threw that money into the appropriate receptacle corresponding to the gift that they brought. The remaining horns were designated for communal free-will offerings. So when an offerer came with his offering, for all but the free will offerings, which could be given in anonymity, they had to declare the amount of the gift, declare its purpose to the officiating priest, who's standing there approving of the gift, watching over it, and then he drops his gift into the trumpet-shaped *shofar*. Lots of noise, lots of attention on the offerer, lots of attention on his gift.

Somehow, our Lord is able to look past all the wealth, look past all the ostentation, somehow he's able to listen through the cacophony of offers and priests and offerings hitting silver

shofars. He's able to see this poor widow. He's able to hear her tiny little contribution entering into the offering box. Jesus looked up. He saw the rich putting their gifts in the offering box. He saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. Jesus comes to his point in verse 3 saying, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow put in more than all of them."

Those listening to this, not only the disciples, but the crowd also listening in, they had to stifle a laugh at this point. Are you kidding me? She put in two small copper coins. The word lepta, singular lepton, plural lepta, comes from the verb lepto, which means to strip off or to peel, so it can refer to something that's the peel of something else. So it's something that's thin. It came to refer to something that was paper-thin or ultra-fine, like the skin of a grape.

This poor widow puts in two small copper coins as thin as a withered leaf into the offering box. And just to give you a rough sense of their value, a denarius, you remember, is one day's wage, right? Denarius, one day's wage. Someone makes 20 bucks an hour for an 8-hour day, they make $160.00, right? Two lepta is 128th of a denarius, very small amount, one 128th of a denarius. So again, if someone makes 20 bucks an hour, 8-hour day, 160 bucks, that's the value of a denarius. The widow, by

comparison, dropped a meager $1.25 into the offering box. Hardly noticeable, totally ignored by everybody else. Hard to make a sound when it hits the silver shofar. Hardly noticeable to any but our Lord.

How did our Lord know what she put in? How did he know what it cost her? Well, if she'd put the offering into one of the designated boxes, well, she had to call it out. She had to mention the amount, the purpose of her gift. That had to be acknowledged and approved by the officiating priests, and then she could give it. So maybe he was listening in. But if it was a free-will gift, which would seem to be the case, here, more likely, there's no need to call it out. So how'd the Lord know? Well, he watched, and he could see the amount by observing the size of the coins. He saw and he watched and observed naturally what others could see, if they observed as well and paid close attention.

But by what Jesus says in verse 4, he talks about something he can only know in his divine nature by his omniscience, namely that this $1.25 offering, one 128th of a day's wage, he knew that that was all she had to live on. How would he know that? Watching any widow come and give some money, you wouldn't think that she doesn't have more in reserve back at home. He knows by

his omniscience something only God can know. He knows in his divine nature as the Son of God, here he knows something only God can know, namely that that $1.25 is her last $1.25. And she just dropped it in the offering box.

And now we come to his point in verses 3 and 4, "Truly, I tell you." When he says, "Truly I tell you", that's a formula for listen up, pay attention, I've got something important to say. I'm going to give you a principle of truth. "This poor widow has put in more than all of them, for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she had to live on." Now if that's not the very illustration of what it means to devour a widow, I don't know what is.

Notice that Jesus, here, is not commenting on whether she should have given all that she had to live on. He's not making a comment on giving. He's not teaching a pattern of giving. He's not even condemning the rich for giving out of their abundance. He's not commending the widow for giving out of her utter destitution and poverty either. I'm telling you, false teachers make merchandise of this text by distorting it and perverting it and getting everybody to feel bad about their giving.

I'll just tell you right up front, I'm not going to do that because that's not what this text teaches. It's not what Jesus

is trying to convey here. This is not a pattern of giving, that is to say that your giving has to hurt every time, that the rich were wrong for not feeling their giving. It's not saying that even though you cannot pay rent, you're to take whatever you have, take this wild leap of faith, give the rest to God or to the church or to that really convincing televangelist, and just let it fly and know that God is going to miraculously multiply your gift.

Let's just be very clear about this. What we see here with this widow, this is not giving that God approves or commends or desires for any of us. Jesus is simply commenting, here, on what he sees, what he knows, both by natural observation and by supernatural revelation. What he sees and what he knows is this, that these scribes and their system of religion have devoured this widow. She gave everything she had to live on. He's watching it happen right in front of his face at this very moment. It's appalling and it's tragic. And he's grabbing his disciples by the neck and saying, look at that.

So why does he make this observation about proportional giving? That is to say, "this widow gave more than all the rest." Sounds like a commendation, doesn't it? Why does he say, "She gives more than all the rest?" Oh, she felt it, didn't she?

Proportionate to what she had, she gave 100%, 100%. I realize that for the wealthy, in order to give to a point where they feel like it hurts, that's a lot of money. They've got to take a large chunk of money in order to make them feel it. That's not what Jesus is saying, here. All he's saying is that because they have more money than this widow, more money than the poor, the rich aren't going to feel it like she does. And because they don't feel it, you know what they're inclined to do or not do? They're inclined not to notice what their religion is doing to the poorest of the people among them. That's the point.

American Christian, we live in a land, and we should not be apologetic about it but we should give thanks to God for it, but we live in a land with wealth. We live in a land with affluence. We live in a land where we're all dressed nicely, sitting in a room with climate control and lighting. We shouldn't go skulking around saying, I feel so bad for my privilege. We should give thanks to God for the things that we have and the comforts we enjoy. At the same time, we should never let our comforts dull us to the plight of other people.

And that's what's so remarkable about Jesus. Though the rich didn't feel it, though their giving is never going to come to the level where they're feeling like the widow feels it,

Jesus felt it. He, though being rich, became poor. He, though the God of the entire universe, looks and sees someone that he cares for, someone who ought to be cared for by true religion, by the heart of true religion, ought to be noticed.

But beloved, listen, God will bring every act, every attitude into judgment. He will expose all false religion. He will reveal all religious hypocrisy, ripping the mask off to show it for what it is in all of its ugliness. And then he will judge it because, as Jesus said it very clearly, Luke 20:47, religious hypocrites "will receive the greater condemnation." And God shows no favoritism. He's no respecter of persons. Jesus isn't looking at the Jews and saying, well, they're Jews. They're my people. I'll talk to them privately.

He's going to judge this, as we're going to see, starting in Luke 21:25. God plans to burn down this entire system, and burn it to the ground. While some were speaking of the temple complex, Luke 21:5, how it was adorned with all these noble stones, beautiful stones, all these offerings that are paying for all the structure and all the improvement and all the beautification, he said, "You know what? As for these things that you see, the days are going to come when there will not be

left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down. It's all coming down, guys."

Don't be impressed with the ostentatious display of wealth and glory. Don't look at the size of the buildings. Don't look at the cars that the pastors drive. Don't look at the wealth of the congregation. Don't look at all of the stuff that they say they can do and the outreaches and all the stuff for the kids and the programs. Don't look at all that stuff. Ask this question: How do they treat the weak and the vulnerable among them? Do they care for the poor, for the widows, for the orphans? Do they have a heart of concern for all people, regardless of their status, their wealth, their bank account, how they look, how they appear? Does that religion, does that church teach no favoritism? Does it treat everybody with the same level of love and bring the same level of heat and judgment?

God is going to judge Jerusalem. We know this. We're entering into the Olivet Discourse, which is all about the judgment coming on Jerusalem. God is going to judge Jerusalem along with its precious temple, the temple that they praised and adored, that they flaunted as God's approval upon their city and in part, he's going to do this because the keepers of Israel's

religion had built their system on the backs of the weak and the vulnerable, like this impoverished widow, and they turned the temple of God into a den of robbers. Do not be deceived. God will not be mocked.

Beloved, he watches our church, too. If he's no respecter of persons or movements or groups of people, he's no respecter of times, places. His omniscient gaze is upon all of us, every heart, including mine, including yours, too. We dare not trifle with him. We dare not think we can get away with sin, sinful thinking, hypocritical religion, unresolved anger, unresolved bitterness, evil motives, lustful greed.

Whatever it is, know that God sees all, just as Jesus shot through the crowd and his laser focus could be set on this woman and her plight. He sees everything. He sees the nature of all things. He knows all of us. Whatever it is, God is going to bring every deed to account, every attitude to account, every heart to account. Don't ignore me on this. There is no church, there's no family, no home, no marriage, no individual, no institution, nothing is off limits. Nothing gets a pass. If God did not spare Israel the natural branches, neither will he spare us if we refuse to listen to him, heed his warnings, obey his instruction.

Having said all that, I want to draw our attention back to the widow for a moment. As I said, Jesus isn't commending her giving. He's sorrowing over her giving, what it represents, this evil system that preys upon the poor and does it in the name of God. And yet we need to see just by Jesus drawing this lesson out for his disciples, notice that this widow is not forgotten by God. She doesn't pass under the Lord's radar.

We've seen this throughout Luke's Gospel. The widows seem to be under the special care of God, though they may be poor, defenseless, and vulnerable and in the company of evil, ambitious designs of hypocrites, God has mercy on them. He has compassion for them. We think of the poor widow of Nain, who received her dead son, her only son, back to life, restored back to her, Luke 17:12 and following, the widow of Nain. We don't know her spiritual condition. We don't know really anything about her. We just know she had a son who died. They're walking in the funeral procession, and Jesus raises her son back to life, gives her back her son.

He cares. He has compassion. In fact, the widows throughout Luke's Gospel, many of them are examples of great faith. Anna at the temple in Luke 2:37, there's the widow of Zarephath referenced in Luke 4:26. There's the importunate widow before

the unjust judge in Luke 18:5 who's used, for example, of her importunity, her pressing, and pressing, pressing her cause. I'm not saying this widow was a believer. We just don't have enough information to say one way or another. But what I am saying is this, that God cares for the widows. He cares for the weak, for the vulnerable, and he judges the validity of our religion in great measure by the consequences of our religion. "You'll know them by their fruits."

We see the parallels between the previous account, Luke 20:45-47, and this account in Luke 21:1-4. We see the scribes paralleled to the rich, lots of money. We see the cheated widows illustrated by the destitute widow. The parallels show us the strong versus the weak, the rich versus the poor, the falsely pious hypocrites with sincere believers. And the strong and the rich and the wealthy and the powerful and the ungodly, they're not getting away with anything.

Just know that your God is just. Even as he has a heart of mercy and compassion for all widows, for all who are weak and vulnerable, he also has a heart of justice as well. And I'll just call to mind the widow, I mentioned, the widow of Zarephath whom Elijah was sent to. Remember, she was a pagan, she was a Gentile, and Elijah was sent to her. And Jesus said that along

the way of walking to the widow at Zarephath, Elijah had to pass by the homes of many widows in Israel.

It's not just because they're widows that they somehow get more favor from God. They, too, have a vertical relationship with him, and they must give an account. Their poverty doesn't make them elevated in their status before God. But we do see these parallels and these contrasts throughout Luke's Gospel that cause us as a people to care for and pay attention to those whom society ignores, and I would say in an affluent society like ours, ignored in the extreme, set aside, marginalized, not cared for, not looked after.

This poor widow, her giving contributed to a false system of greed and corruption. I know it was only $1.25, but take that from that widow, the rest of the widows, it makes a hefty sum. It devoured her very life. And God is watching, and Jesus noticed. And I love what J. C. Ryle says about this. He says, "We might have supposed that our Lord's mind at this time would have been wholly preoccupied with what was going to happen to him." I mean, think about it. His betrayal, his unjust trial, his cross, his passion, his death were all close at hand, and he knew it. Only days away, couple days away. The approaching destruction of the temple, the scattering of the Jews, the long

period of time before his second coming were all things which were spread out before his mind.

And yet we find him taking time to notice what was happening around him. He doesn't consider it beneath him to observe the actions of a poor widow. J. C. Ryle goes on to say this, "Let poor believers take comfort from this great truth. Let them remember daily that their master in heaven notices everything that's done on earth, and the lives of cottagers are noticed by him as much as the lives of kings. The act of a poor believer has as much dignity about them as the acts of a prince." End of quote from J. C. Ryle.

And I'll just say, beloved, that we, too, must follow in the steps of our Lord to notice, to not let our affluence and our abundance and our comfort and our ease, I'm not saying we should go around skulking about, embarrassed for our privilege, as we're being told we must do, to genuflect before everybody who's been oppressed. That is wicked, just a different kind of wickedness in a different direction. No, when we are given wealth, we should thank God for it. We should enjoy the things that he gives us. And yet, at the same time, we must be truly pious people, truly godly people, by noticing those who are without, by caring for the weak, by caring for the vulnerable,

not letting them be taken advantage of. Because God is merciful, we should be merciful. Because Jesus sees, we should ask him for eyes to see as well, that we, too, can notice. God cares and we should care.

Having said that, it follows, then, that when we do notice widows or vulnerable people, maybe people of lesser intelligence than us, maybe people of lesser religion, a bad background in religion, weak teaching, when we notice them being taken advantage of by the unscrupulous, vulnerable people, falling prey to false religion, fooled by religious hypocrites, fooled by the masks that people wear, and they're very clever, by the way, when we notice that, beloved, it is our duty as the stronger and the better-taught to step in and rescue, have a heart, show compassion. Speak the truth in love, but speak truth. Do not mince words. Be straightforward and direct, and you confront the scribes that you see around us. You confront the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the chief priests that you see represented around us in all forms of false religion.

If you find it in your own heart, expose it, repent, ask God to drive it away from you. Man, you go, and once you've pulled that log from your eye, you go and try to pull that from others as well. You rescue those who are weak and vulnerable.

You care for the orphans and the widows by rescuing them from con artists and hypocrites like these. Can we do that together in 2024 and beyond? Can we do that as a church? Beloved, have a heart for the most vulnerable and weak among us. Tell them the truth. Whether it's in your family, your neighbors, your friends, your home, whatever it is, tell them the truth. Love them and rescue them in that way. Join me in a word of prayer.

Our Father, we give thanks to you for just the beauty and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, who could see so clearly. He discerned every situation so perfectly. And then in the wisdom and the genius of Scripture, by the Holy Spirit's working through the author Luke and the authors Matthew and Mark, just to say exactly what you once said, to teach us and tell us the truth, and give us discernment and wisdom and good judgment.

Oh, we pray, Father, that you would help us to be your agents here on this earth, to tell people the truth and rescue the perishing, to care for the dying, to notice all people, rich and poor, needy and affluent. Help us to love them by giving them the saving truth of the gospel, not mincing any words, not fumbling around, but just getting to the heart of it, so that we can expose the heart of false religion, point out the fruit of false religion, and point them to the truth, the true religion

of the true God and his true Christ, our Messiah, our Savior.

It's in his name we pray. Amen.