

The High Price of Righteousness

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel is a great favorite of those disgraceful, money-grubbing televangelists who are forever trying to separate their listeners from their hard-earned dollars. It's also a favorite of those only slightly more respectable folks who are always coming up with new stewardship programs for churches to use in order to spur their members toward greater giving. And it's easy to see why. The text is clear: Jesus parked himself next to the offering box in the temple and paid close attention to what people were putting inside. He had nothing nice to say about those who, though they gave much, only gave from what they had in excess – their leftovers, if you will. But he had what seemed to be high words of praise for a poor widow who, though she had very little to give, gave it all to the service of the Lord.

You don't need a doctor's degree in theology to turn this account into a scathing sermon that lays on people the ultimate guilt trip. It goes something like this: Jesus is watching you. In particular, he's paying close attention to what *you* are putting in the offering plate. Are you giving only from your excess, just rendering your leftovers for Jesus? Or are you giving him your all – giving 'til it hurts? How is Jesus responding to your giving: does he have for you high words of praise or a silent stare of angry condemnation?

Now, I won't deny that the account lends itself to that kind of application; but to do so is more than a bit manipulative. It's wrong to use guilt as the motivation for Christian giving. And implying that Jesus would be happier with you if you gave more can only lead to self-righteousness. But perhaps the biggest problem with this approach to the text is that it misses point Jesus is making entirely. This episode isn't about how much or how little one gives to the ministry of the church. It's about the futility of human works and how one becomes truly righteous in the sight of God.

But to explain that we have to see this episode in its greater context. It's only by lifting it out of context – as if it were unrelated to what's going on all around it – that it can be misused as I just described.

So, what is the situation? We're at the end of Jesus' public ministry. It's probably Wednesday of Holy Week. Several days earlier Jesus and his followers had staged that Palm Sunday parade that shook up the whole city of Jerusalem and especially irritated the religious authorities. Since then Jesus has been spending his days on the temple courts teaching; teaching and being challenged by those who resent him and want to see him fall. They've come at him with a series of diabolically clever questions which they believe will trip him up and cause him to lose the respect of the people. But every time he bests them. He shows them how their thinking about spiritual matters is completely wrong. The traps they lay for him end up snapping shut on themselves. They're forced to slink away in humiliation. Finally, after all their attempts fail so shamefully, they give it up. No one dare ask him any more questions.

Jesus then turns the tables. He goes on the offense and begins to ask them questions – questions that they are unable to answer. The supposedly brilliant Bible scholars and religious authorities are revealed for the hacks they are. They find it infuriating that this unstudied itinerant preacher from Galilee is making them look like fools. But what can they do? If they arrest him here in public before the crowd that watched as he dominated them in a battle of religious wits they'll only make themselves look worse.

And now we come to today's lesson. Having handily swatted away all the challenges of his foes and cowed them into silence with his questions for them, Jesus casts off the gloves and goes into full attack mode. "Beware of the scribes", he tells the crowd around him. "These 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." Bam! This is a blanket condemnation of the all religious elite there in Jerusalem. And it's hard for us to understand just how scandalous these words of Jesus would have been not just to his enemies but to the entire crowd listening to him. "Wait. These are the people we all look up to, the ones we wish we could be and that all strive to be like. They are the most zealously observant of the Laws of Moses and the Tradition of the Elders. They go above and beyond the call of duty to walk in the way of righteousness before the Lord. Beware of them? They are our best examples of holy living!"

And that's the biggest problem Jesus has been addressing throughout his three year ministry. The religion of the Jews at the time of Christ had been completely hijacked by those in charge. They had changed it from a religion of God's grace and forgiveness through sacrificial atonement to one of man's works – and in particular outward works: things that other people can see. The basic notion was this: if you look good, you are good. This is what this thing called the Tradition of the Elders was all about. What it was, was a code of rules on top of the Laws of Moses. You see, most people don't go around visibly murdering, stealing, adulterating, or bearing false witness in court against their neighbors. That's relatively easy. Ah, but these additional rules: the extra ceremonial washings they prescribed for everything you can imagine, the thousands of regulations they came up with for what does or doesn't constitute work on the Sabbath day, the added days of fasting they decided would be a good idea – it was by carefully observing these and dozens of other man-made rules that they said made a person truly righteous in the sight of God. By the time of Christ this extra moral code, the Tradition of the Elders, had risen to the same status as Holy Scripture. Though God had not given these commands, they were treated as if he had.

The scribes Jesus denounces are the ones who most scrupulously followed these rules. The long robes they wore were a mark of their status. They said to everyone, "Look at me. Aren't I holy?" The greetings they craved in the markets would go something like this: "Oh, my lord Simon, how honored I am to have a man so great and godly as you visit my humble vegetable stand." To which Simon the scribe might reply, "Think nothing of it, my good man", by which he actually means, "Yes, you're right. I have honored you with my presence, haven't I?" It was all about the show, the outward appearance of righteousness – and the honor that went with it, which explains having the best seats in the synagogue and the places of honor at feasts; that is to say, the places where everyone else can see you.

"These are they who devour widows' houses and for pretense make long prayers", Jesus says. Taking the second item first, the long prayers, that's easy to understand. Nothing like a good, long, pious sounding prayer to showcase to the world your extreme devotion to the Lord; and apparently the scribes were masters of the craft.

But what does it mean to devour widows' homes? This has stumped a lot of people; but it's precisely this that is being explained in the second part of today's lesson. It's after making this cryptic remark that Jesus goes and sits near an offering box. There were several of them in the temple, all of them at the base of the various steps of stairs that led from the court of Jewish women up to the court of Jewish men. That way men could make their offerings before going up to their court and women could still reach them to make their deposits. Two things you need to know about these offering boxes. First, they were fairly tall and made of metal. That way whenever someone made an offering, there'd be plenty of noise as the coins bounced around inside and came to rest. The bigger and heavier the deposit, the more satisfying the sound and

louder the announcement to the world that said, “Look at me and how much I’m giving.” The second thing is that there was no prescription in God’s Law for these offerings. This was part of the Tradition of the Elders. What the Law of Moses actually required was this: every Jewish man (and only Jewish men) was to pay annually one coin – a half shekel of silver, if I recall correctly. That was the temple tax. He was also to pay a ten percent tithe on his income to support the Levites who served as priests and teachers throughout the nation; but that wasn’t collected here at the temple. No, this offering was over and above anything the Lord commanded. And it went to support folks like the scribes who devoted themselves full time to observing the traditions, making long prayers, and otherwise being showcases of righteous living.

But now here’s the thing: because this offering had become part of the Tradition of the Elders, and because that tradition had been elevated to the status of Scripture, you could not consider yourself righteous before the Lord if you came to the temple and didn’t make an offering. That was no problem for the many rich people Jesus watched dropping handfuls of heavy coins into the box – no doubt spacing the fall of the coins for maximum sound effect. But it was a big problem for the poor widow Jesus saw putting in her two tiny coins. It was, as Jesus said, “All she had to live on.” And rather than think of this as her last two coins in the world, the word Jesus uses would convey more the idea of a daily or weekly living allowance. That is to say by depositing her coins, she’d go without food today or maybe for several days.

Jesus rightly points out to his disciples that her offering was far more than the others gave. But it’s right here that the text is misunderstood and abused. It’s normally assumed that Jesus is commending her for her sacrificial giving (like in the hymn we just sang). There’s something to be said for sacrificial giving, I’ll admit; but that isn’t what Jesus is saying here. He sees her as a victim, a victim of the false legalistic religion foisted upon her by the spiritual leaders who have hijacked the faith and have told her that unless she pays she’s got no business calling herself a child of God. She gives her coins because she thinks that by so doing she can be counted righteous in the sight of God. Why? Because that’s what she’s been taught to believe. Indeed, it’s what the sinful flesh in all of us wants to believe: that we can by our own actions and sacrifices become righteous before God.

But this what Jesus means when he says the religiously elite scribes “devour widow’s homes”. They’re abusing people like this poor widow in the worst sorts of ways. Elsewhere he accuses them of laying heavy burdens on people that they themselves refuse to carry. It’s spiritual tyranny. Their legalistic teaching is robbing people of life and destroying their souls; and for it these leaders deserve the greater condemnation. And if this unpacking of the text is a little unsettling to you, consider this: do you really imagine that God is pleased when a poor widow woman goes without food because she’s given the last of her grocery money to the church? Is he so needy or stingy that he delights to withhold bread from the mouths of widows and orphans? Does that sound at all like the God we worship? Consider too that in the early Christian Church things were reversed and offerings were collected to assist the poor and needy. No one would have expected someone like this widow who had so very little to give an offering. Instead she would have been given something by the church to supplement her meager living allowance.

This morning’s Gospel is really about Jesus declaring war on an entire way of thinking, the kind of thinking that says righteousness before God is attained by our human works and the sacrifices we make for the Lord. And don’t think you are immune to it. The sinful nature in all of us is a natural legalist. It’s the part of you that carefully counts how many Sundays you attend services, how much money you give to support the work of the church and its missions, how many hours you devote to other church related tasks and functions, how much time you spend

in prayer and Bible study, and so on; and then it awards you a score on the righteousness scale. “How am I doing? Oh, about an 85% this week, I’d say. I’ll try to bring it up next week. But at least I’m doing better than a lot of the rest of the folks around here.” You know that voice in you of which I speak. Yes? That’s the scribe in you.

It was that voice that drove the poor widow to give her last two coins in an effort to convince herself that she was righteous before the Lord. Jesus said she gave more than all the others. That’s true. But you know what? It wasn’t enough. It’s never enough. No amount of money, no sacrifice you make, can possibly buy righteousness before God. That could only be purchased with blood, Jesus’ blood: the innocent blood he shed on the cross for our sins. There he paid the high price of our righteousness before God. There he set us free from the Law and the tyranny of thinking that we can by our works or sacrifices make ourselves even one tiny bit more acceptable to him.

And now like the poor widows in the early church who came not to give but to receive what they needed to survive, we come here not to offer our works and sacrifices, but rather to receive the fruits of Christ’s work and his sacrifice for us. It’s an entirely different way of thinking. But it’s the right way. It’s the Gospel way.

And yes, having been set free from the burden of trying to make ourselves righteous, we are also free to love and to live as the children of God. We’re free to support the ongoing work of the church with our time, talents, tithes, and offerings – not to improve our status in God’s eyes or anyone else’s – but for the joy of sharing in the ministry by which we and others are made and kept free in the righteousness of Jesus: the righteousness he purchased for us at so very high a price. Our thanks and praise be to him now and forever. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!