

Proper 27 – The Third-Last Sunday of the Church Year
St. Mark 12:38-44

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus spoke about two types of people in today's Gospel: the scribes and a widow.

The scribes were men who were trained in the Scriptures; "teachers of the Law" the Bibles in your seats call them. You could say these were the Pharisees right-hand men, their apprentices...they were practically Pharisees—so much so that they were often mentioned together in the same breath: "scribes and Pharisees." They liked to put on a show, much like the Pharisees: they "like[d] to walk around in long robes and like[d] greetings in the marketplaces and [having] best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts,...and for a pretense make long prayers." Jesus pointed out their hypocrisy.

Then, there's the widow: she had very little. Jesus sat with His disciples watching people make their temple treasury donations. Those who were rich put in much. Then, the lowly widow happens by and puts in her 2 cents: "two small copper coins, which make a penny." She gave two coins—barely a penny; nevertheless, it was all that she had. While the rest of the people gave a portion of their earnings—most probably keeping in line with the standard tithe donation—the widow gave all the money she had to the temple, keeping nothing for herself.

What can you take away from this?

Well, Jesus' warning still stands. As He taught His disciples to beware the scribes, so you are taught to beware those who would be their descendants. So, beware those modern-day "teachers of the Law" who desire to go around in fine clothing, love prestige and recognition in the malls and supermarkets, the places of honor at special events, and will wax poetic about the great things they do for God.

Today, you might recognize these types from the myriad televangelism shows. There are men like Joel Osteen, Jack Van Impe, Benny Hinn, and Pat Robertson and women like Joyce Meyer, Marilyn Hickey, and Paula White. You might shake your heads at their hypocrisy: teaching as the doctrines of Jesus their own commandments, claiming to proclaim the grace and mercy of God in Christ Jesus alone for salvation while in the same breath telling you that you must do something to prove your sincerity and desire to be saved (which usually involves a donation to their "ministry"). I have heard comments calling those in their line of "ministry" "Prophets for Profits."

Where you might have a difficult time recognizing modern-day scribes is in your own circles. There are men and women of clout in the Missouri Synod who, despite some situations which would seemingly cause humility, suffer from the same hypocrisy as did the scribes in today's text. Preachers and teachers, deaconesses and congregational leaders, anyone with a taste for prestige can become so consumed with it that they would do anything to maintain it. One of the most glaring symptom often encountered in Missouri deals with church growth, where the success of a congregation (and it's pastors and leaders) rests on the size of its membership or Sunday attendance and how large a budget they have. A question often associated with this mindset is, "How many people do you worship?" So, these men and women can often be hailed as champions of the church, saviors of Missouri, and authorities in "running" a "successful" church, and attempts at duplicating their programs and practices are made, perhaps even bringing these people in as experts. By the way, the answer to that question should always be, "One."

That brings me to another part of this warning. You know it better by the axiom, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Those with positions of power and authority in the Church can easily become "drunk" with that power and authority so that they turn to self-serving

religion; the Jesus that they preach is no longer the Jesus of the Scriptures, but a Jesus that suits their needs and desires, that nets for them prestige, favor, fame, power, and butts in the pews. They abuse their power and authority (to be understood as teaching false doctrine) to keep what they earnestly desire, just like the scribes in today's text.

It's a tempting trap that you can and do fall into so easily. The least bit of a taste of power and authority sets Old Adam on fire. Measuring success by the wrong means does the same. And these need not be with regard to your perception in the church, but in every station in life in which you find yourself. The devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh will use these to turn you away from God and to yourself, deceiving you into believing that they are proof that you have God's favor and blessing and that you are doing a good thing for God. And if you are turned inward and away from God, whether or not you outright confess it, you are denying your need for a savior. Oh, how much like the self-serving scribes you so easily have, do, and can become!

True religion is not self-serving; at least, not in the way of the scribes. True religion preaches and teaches the Jesus of the Scriptures who has done all things for sinful humanity. It teaches the Son of God through whom all things were created, who became flesh and "dwelt among us" (cf. John 1:14) for a while in order that He might take the sin of Adam and all the sins you commit into His flesh and die with them. As the Lamb of God, He was the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice who shed His blood on the cross planted on a hill outside of Jerusalem. His love covers the multitude of sins ever committed and still ever to be committed. On the third day, He rose from the dead, putting an end to eternal death for those who trust in Him only for salvation. He now lives and reigns at the right hand of the Father, your eternal Prophet, Priest, and King, ever in glory directing all affairs in the Church and world for you! True religion teaches and preaches Jesus Christ who comes to serve you with forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

This is what should be proclaimed to you by every servant of the Word. And, it is cause for great joy! All things have been done for you because you could not do a thing for yourself. Christ Jesus is come, and He gives Himself to you and for you for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. Dear hearers, you have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus—that is to say, you have died to yourself and risen to newness of life in Christ Jesus—you have died to self-service and have been set free in Christ to serve others.

That leads right into the Jesus' observation of the widow. While it is not directly recorded, one can make an inference from the text. She had little money to her name—about a penny. You would think, for her own well-being and sustenance, she would treasure that penny and use it to serve herself and her temporal needs. However, out of a joy for God her Creator and Redeemer, she gave all that she had to His service. The widow's giving indicates a complete trust in God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—for all of her needs, and I offer this more literal translation of verse 44 as illustration: "...this woman, out of her want, put in all that she had, all of her life." If I may borrow a phrase from those modern-day teachers of the law, she gave her whole life to God.

This widow, most likely a victim of the scribes' devouring as Jesus stated in verse 40, from true, God-given faith, knew that her standing before God was not determined on her prestige, power, or authority, but rested solely in the work, power, and authority of God, Himself. She trusted, by God-given faith, that she was His beloved child, that He would supply all of her needs for her earthly life, but, more importantly, for her eternal life in and with Him. So, joyfully, with this God-given faith and trust, she put her whole life, all that she had to live on, into the temple treasury; so much more than everyone else who, joyfully or not, dropped in their tithe. She gave her whole life to God, not so that He would save it, but because He already had!

Jesus' love for her is proven by what St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for *God loves a cheerful giver.*" (2 Corinthians 9:7, emphasis mine) Jesus loved the widow, not because of the amount she put in, either the

amount stated nor in proportion to what she had, but because she gave joyfully, cheerfully, from a forgiven and redeemed heart.

So it is with you, dear baptized! Your standing before God does not depend on you—your power, authority, prestige, wealth, and works amount to nothing before Him apart from the faith He has given to you to trust solely in Him. Trust in these things is certain death apart from God, for they declare that you do not need Him to be with Him. God knows better—He declared as much through the pen of the prophet Isaiah: “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” (Isaiah 64:6)

Reportedly, the last words of Martin Luther on his death bed were, “Wir sind alle bettler. Hoc est verum.” Those of you who listen to Issues, Etc. know that Rev. Todd Wilken likes to use that first sentence. The whole of it is translated, “We are all beggars. This is true.” A beggar, like the widow in today’s text, is giveable to; that is to say, they have nothing to give; they can do nothing but receive. In order to get by, they need the assistance of others. If they were to give anything, all that they could give would be all that they have, as meager as that could be, like the penny the widow put into the temple treasury. The truth of “Wir sind alle bettler” is that, before God, you have nothing to give, but in order to get by, for this life and eternal life, you must receive. And God is most gracious in what He gives.

The Son of God, at just the right time, took on human flesh and gave His life for all.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)

Jesus said,

If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free...Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:31b-32, 34-36)

By the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on the cross of Calvary, He redeemed all who were under the law, that is everyone! The Son of God, by His death and resurrection, set you free from the curse and condemnation of the law.

Dear baptized, by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you have been made and a son and heir with Him of eternal life. As has been said in your hearing time and time again, “Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done!” The work is done for you; “It is finished,” Jesus said. (cf. John 19:30) Your place with Christ in eternity is secured by Christ Jesus Himself!

What joy is yours! You know, by faith, that all of your needs are met by God, both temporal and eternal! You confess as much when you confess the creeds:

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

Therefore, like the poor widow in today's text, having been served by the only true God through His Son Jesus Christ, you can give joyfully and cheerfully of all that God has given you. Whether that is mere pennies on the dollar or your last penny, whether that is an hour or two a week in service to your congregation or every waking moment in service to your neighbor, whether that is preparing a meal for a friend or filling this space with music to accompany the divine service, it is all done from a heart that is redeemed and set free by the grace of God.

Treasures, time, and talents—all given to you by God out of His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy—returned to Him with thanksgiving and praise. The amount and type doesn't matter with regard to your standing before Him, and should not matter as regards your prestige, power, and authority before others. Your standing before God is secure through the work of Jesus Christ your Lord. St. Paul wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female;" further, there is neither rich nor poor, there is neither supremely talented nor marginally talented, there are neither those with an abundance of time or those with a lack of time, "for you are all one in Christ Jesus." You are all one redeemed and sanctified people of God in Christ Jesus, your Lord and Savior. "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise," (Galatians 3:28-29) because through Him you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.