

Attitudes

Mark 12:38 - 44

Proposition: Christianity without a personal relationship with Christ Jesus ends in hypocrisy and genuine faith in Christ Jesus leads to generosity.

Application: Make sure your Christian life is rooted in a personal relationship with Christ Jesus. Be a good steward of the assets the Lord has entrusted to you.

Life is full of contrasts. To highlight this, I am going to give you a quick quiz. No worries, it will be easy! I will give you a word and you give me the opposite. Ready? The opposite of **Fast?** The opposite of **Long?** The opposite of **Cold?** The opposite of **Young?** The opposite of **Rich?** In the passage we are looking at Jesus acquaints us with two contrasting people: greedy proud scribes, and a generous poor widow.

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I. Formalism of Proud Scribes (12:38 – 40):

Prevent Religious Formalism (12:38, 39): Jesus pointed to the religious formalism of some scribes and warned the 12 not to follow their practice.

Pious in prayer: Some scribes craved the praise of others. They took pleasure strolling in public places to be seen with their prayer shawls draped around their shoulders. They wore them not to enhance prayer but to be seen as pious. Some scribes hoped that people would honour them because of their status in Israel.

Praise for prestige: They did not want to know the names of others; they wanted others to know their names. They did not want to be the greeters they wanted to be greeted by their titles - such as reverend doctor so and so. Some scribes wanted to be seen as *pious* they wanted to receive *praise* for their status. They also sought *pre-eminence* in synagogues.

Pre-eminent in Public Places: The best seats in synagogues were chairs on a raised platform facing the congregation in front of the ark that contained the Torah scrolls. Such places were reserved for people of status. Not only did some scribes seek *pre-eminence* in synagogues they also pursued *places of honour* at banquets.

Places of Honour at Banquets: They wanted to sit at the head table next to the host. And some scribes used their positions of power to coerce the most vulnerable.

Power over the Vulnerable (12:40a): Scribes in ancient Israel were not allowed to charge a fee for their teaching. They either had to support themselves with a trade; or scribes had to depend on the gifts of others. Besides teaching, scribes also wrote up wills and helped widows in estate planning. Some scribes gained the trust of widows asking them to support their religious work then coerced the widow to will their houses to them as proof of their faith in God. This was not just a problem with some scribes of Israel, the same wrongs happened with church leaders during the Middle Ages. Starting in the 11th century, priests in the Catholic Church sold *certificates of indulgence* to distraught parishioners. The belief was that indulgences would reduce the time a loved one had to spend in purgatory. The more money a person gave the more time was taken off. Indulgences were a way to raise funds for building projects such as St Peter's Basilica in Vatican City. This practice was one of the reasons for the Protestant Reformation.

To receive honor and respect some scribes flaunted their *piety*, craved *praise* for their status, sought *pre-eminence* in synagogues, pursued *places of honor* at banquets and even used their *power* to persuade widows to include them in their will. Lastly, as a pretence some scribes uttered *pompous prayers*.

Pompous Prayers (12:40b): Some scribes uttered lengthy prayers not so God might hear, but so those nearby could hear and be impressed. Speaking about prayer Bible teacher Dr. Akin once said, "*better a few fumbling words from a humble heart than a marvelous oration from a proud heart.*" Some scribes made long public prayers, but their private prayers were likely short. Their pompous prayers disguised their proud hearts (Eccl 5:1, 2). It is a grave error to needlessly multiply words before God. When we speak to the Lord, we are not to give free rein to our tongue and pile up words. We are to approach the Lord with reverence. If we present a pious facade to disguise our sinful motives we receive stricter judgment from God. As followers of Christ Jesus, we must not be pretentious. As followers of Christ Jesus, we must not play the hypocrite. We must not use religion as a reason for recognition. We must not use godliness as a pretense for selfish gain. We must not profit from piety. We must not enter the ministry because there is money to be made. Instead, we should take Psalm 139 to heart (Ps 139:23, 24). Ask the Lord to probe our hearts and bring to light any motive that might offend Him and ask Him to replace wrong motives with right motives so that we may walk in a manner worthy of His name.

The text now moves from the false religion of proud scribes to the true faith of a poor widow. She may be living proof of a widow financially ruined by a ruthless scribe. Since it was the Passover season large crowds gathered in the temple court and dropped their money in the coffers. Jesus wanted to know what people did with their money. So, He observed a stream of people giving their offering as they passed by.

II. Faithfulness of a Poor Widow (12:41 – 44)

Plentiful Giving (12:41): The treasury was found in the women's court of the temple grounds. It contained 13 trumpet shaped brass boxes narrow at the top, wide at the bottom. The brass boxes had etchings on them stating what the offerings were destined for. If one wanted to give a temple tax, it would go in a box that said temple tax. Five of the trumpet shaped boxes were for free will offerings. Jesus noticed the wealthy threw money in by the handful. They gave a lot because they had a lot. When coins hit the base of the brass box they would make a sound. The more one gave the louder the noise and the more the giver would be noticed. The main point of this verse is that the Lord sees our giving. And we will soon find out what matters is not the amount of our gift, but the attitude in our giving.

Poor Widow (12:42, 43): This widow was an outcast for two reasons. She was poor and she was a widow. One of the most vulnerable people groups in ancient Israel were widows. Therefore, it was against the law to afflict a widow (Ex 22:22; Ps 68:5). A distressed widow can call on the Lord and He will hear, He will answer, He will defend.

The two coins the widow put in the brass box were the smallest coins in circulation. The smallest coin in Canada is a nickel. In ancient Israel, the two coins equalled 1/64th of a day's wage. Today a standard wage in Canada is about \$35/hour. So, a day's wage is about \$280. If the two coins equalled about 1/64th of a day's wage, then the amount this widow put in the coffer in today's value is \$4.40. This was all she had to live on. She could not give anymore. She could have given a bit less. She could have put one coin in the coffer and kept the other for herself. Giving less than two coins was not allowed under law. The most famous giver in Scripture, gave the smallest amount by law. The least of the least gave the least of all, yet she is the most honoured giver in Scripture. What she did has impressed millions upon millions of people throughout the ages. Little did she know the Lord of Glory was present that day. He saw both the gift and the heart of the giver. He knew what no one else could know (1 Sam 16:7). We are often impressed by what we see. Yet what we see may not be what is real. Upon hearing the loud sound of coins dropped in the coffer, the people nearby may have been impressed by the generosity of the wealthy. Yet the dim sound of the widow's two coins dropped in the coffer may have not been noticed at all. But in the end this widow was the most generous giver in Scripture. What she gave was minute in man's eyes but to God it was large. The Lord saw her heart. Her heart was full of faith. What this widow did was so priceless Jesus called His disciples to teach them a vital lesson on the generosity of faith. He did not commend the wealthy people but the poor widow because her faith in the Lord and love for Him moved her to give all she had. Does this not remind us of the love of Christ Jesus. He loved us so much that He gave all that He had - His very own life so that though faith in Him we might enter the kingdom.

The wealthy gave a lot because they had a lot to give.

Presenting Gifts in Faith (12:44): They may have also given a lot because they knew many were watching. In this way they gave out of pride not in faith. When giving to the Lord it is not the portion of our assets but the proportion that counts. In terms of percentage of assets this widow gave more than all the gifts the wealthy offered. Bible scholar William Kelly once said, “*The test of liberality is not what is given but what is left.*” What she gave to the Lord was her last means of support. From that point onward she trusted the Lord to provide for her needs. The Lord favoured her gift because she gave in faith. And only by faith can someone give in this way. Genuine faith leads to generous giving (Phil 4:18, 19). The Lord rewards faith. For instance, this widow’s gift found its way in the Gospels. For over 2000 years her act of faith has been talked about and preached to millions of people on every continent. I often wonder what she found when she arrived home that day. Did the Lord send someone to her house with a large gift? I have heard stories of prisoners in concentration camps who were given scraps of bread and watery bowls of soup and that was all they had. But they found a new way of giving. One man took a tenth of his bread everyday and gave it to fellow prisoners; another man fasted every tenth day and on his fast day gave his full meal to someone else. It is not the amount in our hands that matter it is the attitude of our heart.

If our life as a Christian is not rooted in a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, then our Christianity becomes self centered focussed on self-righteousness not the righteousness of God. We can only live the Christian life in a faith relationship with Christ Jesus. If we attempt to live the Christian life in our own strength then like some scribes our Christianity will descend into hypocrisy.

We give in gratitude for all that God has given us. All we have belongs to Him. And we have a duty to rightly steward the assets He has gifted to us. Money is a good servant but a poor master. We must learn to control money and not let it control us. God entrusts assets to us for at least three reasons: 1. To meet our physical and spiritual needs. 2. So His plan and purposes can move forward here and around the world. 3. To share our surplus with those who have little.

The lesson of the scribes is that Christian living is based on a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. The lesson of the widow is that genuine faith leads to generous giving.