



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 20:45-21:4

To understand more about the empty self-righteousness of the scribes.

Habits of Widows and Non-Widows

An interesting stat surfaced a little over a decade ago, cited in Christianity Today by Ted Olsen, that demonstrated the differences in tithing habits between widows and non-widows. Widows and widowers in the United States who say they give 10 percent or more of their income to the church amount to 17.6 percent. By contrast, non-widowed Americans who give ten percent or more of their income only make up 8.6 percent. Whether this is true in 2023 is unclear, but what is clear is the percentage of American churchgoers who do not give: 37 percent. That means that at least over one third of the overall morning attendance in the average church in America is showing up, consuming the sermon, consuming a Bible study, drinking free coffee, and participating in life-giving ministries with no financial support given to maintain those things. In Luke 21, Jesus gives a contrast between what empty faith and full faith looks like.

Beware! The Scribes!

Verses 45 through 47 give a brief but telling (and very public) description of the scribes. Below is a breakdown of some of the keywords and themes throughout this description.

DISPLAY

The first thing Jesus mentions is the “long robes” that the scribes are known for, and the force of this description implies that their length is about form not function. Matthew gives some additional details in Matthew 23:5: “For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.” Phylacteries were small leather

boxes that contained passages of Scripture in them that were typically worn on the forehead and the left arm (Ex. 13:9; Deut. 6:8). The fringes or tassels were typically blue or white cords that were located at the four hems of the out robe per the instructions of Number 15:37-41. They served as a reminder to obey the Torah, and were not necessarily wrong to wear. In fact, Jesus likely had tassels on His attire given the descriptions in Matthew 9:20 and 14:36. Luke doesn't highlight these details but simply shorthands them into the catch-all description of "long robes." The point here is that the scribes dress in a manner that gets people's attention. They want to be seen and so they dress the part. They want the accolades so they wear clothes that set them apart from the regular passersby. This desire to look and be wealthy is in sharp contrast to Jesus' teaching Luke 12:22-32.

ATTENTION

He goes on and says they "love greetings in the marketplace" (Lk. 20:46). This along with their acceptance of preferential treatment in the synagogues puts them in the same category as the Pharisees described in Luke 11:43. They dressed the way they dressed so that while out and about they would be recognized and receive attention through public greeting.

PROMINENCE

More than that, they loved preferential treatment. Jesus speaks to at least two instances of the kind of preferential treatment they liked to receive: "the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts" (Lk. 20:46). This specific type of partiality is condemned later by Jesus' half-brother James: "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" (Ja. 2:1-4). This is the tendency of the human heart apart from the grace of God's redeeming power. People like power and authority and they do what they can to obtain. The scribes exemplify this tendency, and thus Jesus calls them out.

WEALTH

That they are also described as men who "devour widows' houses" sets them in the same camp as those who the prophets of the Old Testament spoke against (Is. 10:2; Amos 2; Mic. 3). Their thirst for power and wealth knows no bounds. They will even take advantage of the widows, the very ones the people of God are instructed to care for above all other people (Ja. 1:27).

HYPOCRITES!

Because of their tendency to put themselves on public display, their desire to receive public attention, their acceptance of preferential treatment, and their willingness to pilfer money away from widows all while "making long prayers for a pretense," they can rightly be called hypocrites. Their long prayers are hollow and meaningless. They sound big and religious and authoritative when they pray but their lives tell a much different and contrary story. They are not who they say they are nor who they pretend they are in public. They are like the shepherds of Israel that Ezekiel decries because of their "me first" mentality (Ez. 34:1-31).

The Generosity of a Widow

While giving public disapproval to the scribes, 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." This sets into motion a statement that is both concise and clear regarding what true gratitude looks like. Below is a breakdown of some key terms.

THE RICH

In Mark's account the people here are simply described as "the crowd" (Mk. 12:41), but here Luke describes this group of people as "the rich." The topic of riches and wealth has received a lot of attention, both good and bad, in biblical studies. Having wealth is not in and of itself a bad thing, for "every good and every perfect gift" comes from God (Ja. 1:17). It is not money, but "the love of money" that is the root of all evil (1 Tim. 6:10). However, "the rich" are usually typified as a group who have put their dependence on money and resources in a temporal state rather than faith in the living God, and thus they act out of these commitments in neglectful and sometimes even sinful way (Ja. 5:1-6). In this section, "the rich" are simply used as something with which Jesus will contrast the actions of the widow. The rich people placed their gifts "in the offering box," and the fact that they are rich indicates their gifts were likely quite generous in comparison to the average person, much less a poor widow.

THE WIDOW AND TWO COPPER COINS

The widow, on the other hand, only had "two small copper coins" to offer (Lk. 21:2). The Greek term for "coin" here, λεπτός (leptos) represents the smallest measurement of money in ancient Palestine, which was approximately 1/132 of a denarius. This means the woman is not simply poor, but at the lowest end of poverty, and exactly the kind of person the people of God should be caring for (Ja. 1:27). She is beyond destitute, and yet the small amount she has is what she gives in total as her offering. While "two cents" pales in comparison to the gifts that were likely given by "the rich," the point is clear - the widow gave *more*, because giving is more about ratios to what one has than it is comparative to what others have.

Two Contrasts

The widow is used in this portion of the narrative to stand in contrast not only to the rich, but to the scribes. They are all about the appearance of faith, but they are hollow and deceptive and hypocritical. The widow, on the other hand, has the most destitute appearance one could have in the ancient world, and yet her faith is full, alive, and dependent on God's goodness. The scribes would never dream of associating with poor widows except to take from them, and thus Jesus' point to the crowds is: "Be more like the widow than the scribes."

What About Now?

One obvious takeaway is the need to evaluate our motives. The scribes did everything from sinful and selfish motives; we are capable of the same. Another takeaway is the importance of understanding that gratitude leads to sacrificial giving. The *amount* given doesn't necessarily reflect a grateful heart as much as the *ratio* of what is given to what is owned does.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 20:45. Who is speaking in this verse? Who is being spoken to? Who is also listening?

2. Read Luke 20:46. Who is Jesus speaking against? In what ways do they display their self-righteousness?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 20:46. In what ways do the scribes receive public attention and preferential treatment?

2. Read Luke 20:47. What does it mean that the scribes “devour widows’ houses?” Why do their long prayers actually condemn them?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 21:1. What was Jesus doing when He “looked up?” What did He see?

2. Read Luke 21:2. What else did He see? What was she doing?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 21:3. What did He say regarding the poor widow and her two copper coins?

2. Read Luke 21:4. What was the reason He gave for what He said in verse 3?

Week 75 Discussion: Motives Matter

In Luke 20:45-47, Jesus speaks against the unrighteous motives of the scribes for why they behave the way they do, specifically in public. The scribes are all about looking the part, receiving attention, being treated differently than other people, and yet they pretend to be spiritually mature people in the way that they pray. Their faith and faithfulness pale in comparison to that of the poor widow described in Luke 21:1-4. Talk as a group about the importance of checking your motives for why you do what you do.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever found yourself acting like the scribes in this story? In what way(s)?
2. Why is outward, public attention the wrong thing to seek after? What does it indicate?
3. Is public attention bad? Or only the desire for it? Why or why not?
4. How does gratitude for your church impact the way you give to your church? Or does it?
5. How do you reflect your gratitude on a weekly basis for the ministries of your church?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus publicly decries the self-righteous hypocrisy of the scribes.
2. Jesus commends the faith of the widow who gives all she has.