

Whom Do You Worship?

Luke 20:45-21:4

As I was preparing this message I read the story of an 87 year old woman named Oselola McCarty. She had made her living by working 12 hour days doing other people's laundry. When she generously donated 150,000 dollars to establish a scholarship fund at a major university, people were amazed.

What's even more amazing is that her gift represented only 60% of her total life savings. When she was asked how she did it, she simply said she lived modestly, saved regularly, and gave generously.

How did she manage to save a quarter of a million dollars over her lifetime? She did it by deciding to live in a specific way. She structured her wants and needs so that she could reach a specific goal. And because she did, she was able to be generous beyond anyone's expectations.

But as impressive as it was for her to save \$250,000 and to give away \$150,000... it pales in comparison to the woman described in our text today from Luke chapter 21. Ms. McCarty gave away a huge amount of money - but she still had \$100,000 in the bank. This woman in Luke basically had two coins to rub together... and she gave them both to God. And when she was done with her donation... she didn't have thousands of dollars left over; she didn't have hundreds of dollars left over, she didn't even have a dollar left... she had nothing. The actions of this unnamed widow tell us a lot about what was important to her.

Before I read our text it's important for us to get the context. We are in the final days of Jesus' earthly life. In the beginning of chapter 20 the Pharisees demand that Jesus tell them by what authority He teaches and who gave Him His authority. Part of the reason for this demand was the way Jesus had chased merchants out of the Temple. In answer to their question, Jesus posed one of His own questions, which the Pharisees refused to answer.

They failed to prove Jesus lacked the authority to do what He was doing. So they tried to trick Him into taking sides between the Roman government and the Jewish people. They asked Him if it was lawful to pay tribute, or taxes, to the Roman government. If he said yes, they would accuse Him before the crowd; if He said, no, they'd accuse Him to the Romans. So he asked them for a coin. When they brought it, He asked them, "Whose likeness and image is stamped on the coin?" They replied, "Caesar's." To which Jesus replied "Give to Caesar the things that

belong to him, (what Caesar has authority over); and give God what belongs to Him (what God has authority over). What a simple answer; and yet, how profound.

Well, the Pharisees were silenced, humiliated in front of the crowds. So the Sadducees, another faction of the religious leaders decided to take their turn at trying to discredit Jesus. As we learned in our study last week, they too failed miserably in their attempt to deny the reality of the resurrection. After silencing His critics, Jesus began to ask His own questions.

So I turn now to a portion of the Holy Scripture in Luke chapter 20. I'll begin reading in verse 45 and read on into chapter 21 and verse 4. The title of my teaching is "Whom Do You Worship?" My text is Luke 20, verse 45 through chapter 21, verse 4.

In this text Jesus contrasts the actions of the Pharisees with the actions of an unnamed widow to reveal the answer to the question, "Whom Do You Worship?" The word pictures Jesus paints show us there are only two kinds of worship; worship of self or worship of God!

Evidences of Self-worship

I'm guessing that most professing Christ-followers would emphatically deny self-worship. I know I would! After all, I've been a follower of Jesus for many years. I believe what the Bible says and I try to live it out. I study the Word of God and I even teach and preach it! How can I be accused of worshipping self? Though your circumstances are different than mine, I suppose your response might be similar.

Jesus said to His disciples in the hearing of the whole crowd, "beware of the scholars of the Law!" These scholars, the religious leaders of the day (mostly Pharisees), would've said they held God's Law in highest esteem. They were scrupulous about making application of God's commands to the smallest details of life. Why would Jesus warn the crowd to "watch out" for them? Because their zeal for the Law caused them to become proud rather than obedient!

The statements Jesus makes about the scholars in the next couple verses show us plainly whom they really worshipped. I fear I may find myself in some of His descriptions; you may too, so brace yourself.

First, these men lived a life of **ostentation**. Maybe you're asking, "What's ostentation?" It's an unnecessary display of wealth, or knowledge, or ability that's done to attract attention. It's done to gain admiration, or envy. Jesus said these men liked walking around in long robes.

Okay, so what's wrong with that? Long robes were the clothing of kings and dignitaries; they were a mark of wealth. Not only were the robes long, they most likely had tassels on the bottom that would've marked these men as teachers of the Law. As teachers, they thought they deserved special respect from the common people.

So let me ask you, "Is there any ostentation in your life; in the life of the church today? Is there any unnecessary display of wealth or knowledge in order to attract attention or admiration?" I remember talking to a young couple who were looking for a church-home. After visiting one congregation they said "We won't go back there; it just seemed like a fashion show." They felt their income level would not allow them to "fit in" in that congregation.

At Heralds of Hope we're members of a large Christian organization. Every so often we attend one of their conventions. We see a lot of ostentation in so-called Christian entertainment, the Christian music industry, and even in Gospel preaching/teaching ministries. This is the way of the world; not the way of the Cross. It's self-worship; not the worship of God.

Another aspect of self-worship is **reputation**. Jesus said these men love to be greeted as "Rabbi," or teacher, in the marketplace. This was the honorary greeting of an inferior to a superior. Inferior and superior shouldn't be terms we use in describing the family of God.

Now, it's true we should strive to have a good reputation. Solomon said "a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches." But to what end? That God may be glorified and evil men may be silenced, according to First Peter 2:15.

This thing of titles can become a real point of contention. In my particular denomination we've never referred to pastors as "Reverend." Our reason, at least in part, is the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:9. As leaders, we do have a greater responsibility, but we are not more holy than those we lead just because we're leaders. Genuine leaders learn how to serve those under their authority and to leave their reputation in God's hands.

God's reputation is so much more important than mine. If I insist that people recognize my accomplishments, or education, or position, it puts the focus on me and takes it off of God. I usurp some of the worship of which He alone is worthy.

And then there's **elevation**. When these men attended the synagogue they wanted to be up front, where the leading elders sat, so everyone could see them. In social settings they wanted the best seats at the table.

Mealtime fellowship had great significance in the ancient world. Guests were seated at the table according to their social status. Earlier in Luke's gospel, chapter 14, Jesus was eating in the home of Simon the Pharisee. While He was there He warned those in attendance about their desire to have the best seats. He counseled them to take the lower seats first, and wait for the host to invite them to a better position.

In that culture, by dining with someone, you expressed a level of acceptance with them. One reason the Pharisees criticized Jesus so harshly was because He ate with sinners. A scrupulous Pharisee would never eat at the home of a common person because he couldn't be sure the food was properly tithed or ceremonially clean!

Do you invite people into your home who can invite you in return? Or do you invite those who can't repay you? True worship treats all people with respect and dignity.

Do you ever have the temptation of wanting to be noticed? I do; but maybe that's because of the role God has allowed me to fill in ministry. I must often remind myself that my position doesn't make me more important than other people. I want God and His name elevated in the eyes of men, not my name.

Darrell Bock tells the story of a certain seminary professor. The building where he worked was off campus, which meant that the logistics of opening and closing the building for students was challenging. Some of the professors flew into the area just for their classes and left immediately after classes to catch their return flights home.

In an effort to solve this problem, a professor on location was asked to lock the facility since he was there at the same time as the visiting professors. But when he was asked to make sure the facility was locked he said, "That's janitorial work, and I'm a department chair." His answer was meant as a refusal; but it revealed more about his heart than he realized.

So the staff person in charge of securing the building called another department chair. When asked if he could do the job he replied, "I do that kind of stuff all the time. Whatever I can do to help, I will do." Servant leadership doesn't recognize titles; it does what needs to be done.

One time at our offices at Heralds of Hope I was coming up the steps from our basement storeroom with some bathroom tissue for the men's room. One of the other staff members saw me and said "I don't think it's necessary for the CEO to replenish the bathroom tissue." I didn't want to be disrespectful but I thought to myself, "This task is not beneath me." True worship leads to service.

The next aspect of self-worship is **exploitation** – “they devour widow’s houses.” These men may have been mismanaging the estates of widows for whom they had been appointed as guardians. They may have been making decisions that would benefit them financially instead of looking out for the widow’s best interests. Widows represented some of the most vulnerable people in that society. And the truly pious were supposed to serve them. Whatever the case, Jesus accused the scribes of exploiting the situation for their own gain.

Now you and I would never do anything like that, would we? You know, there are many ways beside finances to exploit someone. What about exploiting another person’s emotions, or a weakness they have, for our personal benefit? Jesus definitely condemns this kind of behavior as pointing to the worship of self.

And then Jesus says they show off by making long prayers; that’s **affectation**. They appear to be something they are not. This one hits pretty close home. Maybe you and I don’t make long prayers, but what about doing things to make others think we’re more spiritual than we really are?

When I was a teenager I had a friend whose parents worshipped in a very charismatic fellowship. He lamented the fact that on Sunday his parents were very much involved physically and emotionally in the worship service; but the rest of the week their home was a place of yelling and fighting.

But what about our homes? Do you and I say and do things in the privacy of our homes that we wouldn’t want our fellow church members to know about? Isn’t that projecting an image that’s not accurate? Isn’t it an attempt to look better in the eyes of others than what we really are? Isn’t that affectation?

Jesus pronounces harsh judgment on this hypocrisy! If you look at the parallel passage in Matthew’s gospel Jesus spends a whole chapter denouncing the Pharisees for this. Here, He simply says that self-worship under the guise of false piety will receive an extremely severe punishment.

Whatever you and I have, be it possessions, ability, position, reputation, we have been given by God. If Jesus is truly Lord of our lives, if we truly worship Him, then there is no place for personal pride and boasting. The apostle Paul, in I Corinthians 1:31 reminds us, “*He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.*” We need to boast in God and His goodness to us.

Someone has said “The more special we make ourselves, the less special God becomes.” Those are sobering words for you and me to ponder as we reflect on the question, “Whom Do You Worship?”

Evidences of God-worship

We move now to the opening verses of chapter 21. After His lengthy confrontation with the religious elite in the Temple porches, Jesus was most likely tired and ready for some rest. So he seats Himself on the steps leading to the Court of the Women. In this court were 13 trumpet shaped boxes, or chests, placed there to receive the offerings of worshippers. According to Alfred Edersheim, each of the 13 boxes was labeled with a designation for the contribution. There were chests for providing wood, incense, and other things needed for the Temple worship. There were others marked for payment for sacrifices or to make up for past neglect. It must have been very interesting to watch people come and place their gifts in the various receptacles.

This opening verse of the chapter tells us that Jesus observed the rich casting their gifts into the treasury. Mark’s gospel adds that “many who were rich put in much.” With what we just discussed, and with Jesus’ warnings in Matthew 6:2, we know the rich had a tendency to ostentation in this whole area of giving. Why else would Jesus warn us against “sounding a trumpet” before placing our offering in the box?

In the history of Heralds of Hope we’ve had some people who wanted special recognition for a large donation; not many, but a few. They wanted public recognition for their generosity. We’ve had to say “I’m sorry, that’s not how we do things.” On the flip side of that, we’ve had some very generous donors tell us “Please keep my gift confidential.” I believe that attitude more closely reflects Jesus’ teaching.

We also have donors similar to this poor widow. Some of these dear ones in the Lord live on fixed incomes yet as regular as the turning of the calendar page their gift shows up in the mail. And not only do they give, they pray too. Those gifts are precious to us and to the Lord.

So imagine watching these people coming with their gifts; some puffed up with their own self-righteousness, lifting the coins high and letting them clang noisily into the box to draw maximum attention; or maybe even sounding a trumpet before they made their gift. Some may have come dutifully; they were discharging an obligation. Others came cheerfully, eager to give an offering to the Lord in support of His work.

And then here comes an unnamed, poor widow who dropped two small coins into one of the boxes. Can you get the picture? This widow was possibly one of the very ones whom the scribes had devoured her living. You'd think she would've understood how the system was rigged against her and given up. But, no, she comes with her gift to the Lord.

Most likely, the clothing she wore and the condition it was in identified her as a poor widow. Jesus and His disciples must have been watching closely or they would've missed this small offering. Though the text doesn't specifically mention it, we can be sure she didn't make a big show of her giving. How could her miniscule gift compare with the gifts of the rich? I imagine her quietly dropping her offering in the box and stepping quickly and quietly away.

But look at what Jesus said. "Listen up; there's something I want you to understand. This poor widow has put more into the offering than all the others." How could Jesus say that? Alfred Edersheim says that during the time of the Roman leaders Pompey and Crassus, the Temple-Treasury, after lavishly defraying every possible expenditure, still contained the equivalent of nearly half a million dollars. And the vessels of the Temple were valued at about 2 million pounds sterling; that's between 4 and 5 million dollars today. What possible difference could her two coins make in that kind of economy?

The two coins this poor widow put it were called *lepta*. Together they were worth only about one-sixty fourth of a *denarius*. As you may recall, a denarius was the common wage given to a day laborer in that time, and those who earned it certainly couldn't be considered wealthy. The adjective, poor, used to describe this widow means she worked for her living; she didn't rely on charity. With her tiny gift she wasn't looking for man's approval; she just wanted to humbly serve her God.

There was once a preacher named John Broadus who going to talk on this very passage. But before he preached, he left the pulpit and went out with the ushers as they collected the offering. As he went, he watched closely as people put their offerings in the plate. As you can imagine, some of the people were upset, even angry. Some were confused, some shamefaced, others filled with amazement. All were surprised.

When the collection was over, Dr. Broadus went back to the pulpit and said, "My people, if you take to heart that I have seen your offerings this day and know just what sacrifices you have made and what sacrifices you have not made, remember that the Son of God your Savior,

goes about the aisles with every usher and sees with his sleepless eye every cent put into the collection by His people.” Yes, God sees not only the amount, but our motives.

Have you ever felt like the little bit you have to give can’t possibly make much difference? Well, according to what Jesus says here, that’s probably not true!

So what makes her 1/64th of a denarius worth more than the large gifts of the rich? It’s certainly not the amount. No, Jesus said that all the others put in gifts that they gave out of their abundance; but this woman, out of her poverty, put in everything she had. Those who gave the large gifts had so much they’d barely miss the amount they put in. But this poor widow put in ALL she had. And she didn’t have to do it; it was voluntarily given. God saw her heart and her motives, not so much the amount of her gift.

And indeed, is this not what God asks of each one of us; to give Him our ALL?

You know, there’s another lesson here we mustn’t miss. No one is too poor to give! And there is something about giving that draws us closer to God and to our fellowmen.

The story is told of a motherless little girl who came to a mission school in Africa from a native village. She had been treated unkindly in the village. But in the new school she had quickly learned of the gentleness and pity of the friends of Jesus. Her greatest joy came when she was give certain things of her own. A dress, a comb, a brush and above all an enamel plate for her food. She had never owned anything before. And all these were wonderful. But she loved the plate more than anything else; for its roundness and its smoothness and it lovely color.

On the first Sunday the little girl went to the service in the mission church and heard many things that were new and wonderful to her. She learned that Jesus had sent these people to help her and she listened with all her might. She learned more about this wonderful person. She heard of his goodness, and gentleness and love. She learned so much that her lips quivered and tears came into her eyes. Then she saw the people go up to the table and lay their gifts there; gifts of money or food for the work of the mission. And when she asked in a whisper what this meant. She was told it was being done as a thank you for the love of Him who loves us all. The little girl was very unhappy.

Oh, oh but I love him so much that I must find him something too, she said. Do you think he would like to have my plate? And then she took the most precious thing in the world to her; her wonderful enamel plate from under her apron. The girl beside her, who was old enough to be

both wise and kind, looked into her eager little face and answered softly. Yes, he will be very glad to have your plate.

After that all the people in that little church saw the little girl very shyly, yet very eagerly, walk up the aisle to the table and lay the most precious gift she had on the table.

My friend, what about you; whom do you truly worship? I ask myself this question. As I have read and meditated on this text I've been convicted. I live in a land of abundance; I've never truly known want. I've never gone to bed hungry because there was no food available. I've never lacked adequate clothing or shelter. I have more than I need so I've given out of my abundance. But that's what the scribes and Pharisees did. I'd like to think my motives are better than theirs were; but I'm not so sure. I need to be reminded regularly that God sees my heart; He knows my motives for giving.

As offerings are needed still for the service of Christ at home and abroad, so "looking down" now, as then "up," He "sees" who "cast in," and how much. Christ's standard of commendable offering is not our superfluity (our excess), but our deficiency - not what will never be missed, but what costs us some real sacrifice, and just in proportion to the relative amount of that sacrifice.¹

Let the Holy Spirit speak to your heart as I pray. Heavenly Father, maker and sustainer of all things; we give you praise and thanks for your great love and mercy. You owed us nothing, but gave us everything in the person of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And you commanded us to freely give to others, even as you have freely given to us.

Father, forgive me for my selfishness; my desire to hang on to the blessings you've given me. Forgive me for seeking man's approval instead of your approval. Help me to understand that true worship springs from a heart of gratitude.

And Father, as we close the program today I pray for my friend who is listening. Speak to his or her heart through your precious Word and your ever-present Holy Spirit. Teach us together how to worship you in spirit and in truth; for that is what you desire. I ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

¹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Vol. 2, p. 122). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

