

In a small town, there were two brothers who, over the course of many years, cheated, swindled, robbed and generally stole from everyone that they'd ever done business with. The entire community despised and hated these two brothers. Everyone was aware of how disreputable and dishonest they were.

One day, one of the brothers mysteriously died. Although they'd never attended church, the one remaining living brother went to the local pastor and offered vast sums of money if he'd preach the funeral and say the appropriate words, AND, a large bonus, but ONLY if he would - during the course of the eulogy—refer to his brother as “*a saint*.”

The pastor was very troubled by the request. However, it was a very poor church and the church desperately needed a new roof and other repairs. The whole community heard about the pastor's dilemma and were curious as to what he would do. So, the funeral began. The church was packed and the pastor started with the usual prayers, followed by the rites and traditions as required by the church's teachings. In his sermon then referring to the rogue in the box, the pastor paused and turned to face the remaining brother. He began, “*As you all know, this departed man was a horrible person who robbed, cheated, swindled and stole from everyone he ever did business with BUT compared to his brother, he was – “a saint!”*”

All of us like to think, and more importantly have others think, that we're better than we actually are. My in-laws loved to watch a British sitcom, *Keeping Up Appearances* (picture). The central character is Hyacinth Bucket though she insisted it be pronounced as “Bouquet.” She's an eccentric, snobbish lower middle class social climber. Much of the humor comes from the conflict between Hyacinth's vision of herself and who she really is.

The scribes of Jesus' day weren't only social ladder climbers, they were spiritual ladder climbers. Their lives could have been fodder for an episode of **Keeping Up Appearances**. In their effort to look better than they were, they devolved into huge hypocrites. Things haven't changed. We're tempted with that same malady of **Keeping Up Appearances**. We want others to think that we're nicer, kinder and more spiritual than we actually are.

Jesus saw everything. He noticed people. They mattered to Him. They still do today. Jesus made judgment calls. In our passage in Luke that we're considering this morning, Jesus saw two very different kinds of people and discriminated between them. The first were full time religious workers, the scribes, who were hypocrites. The second was an impoverished godly widow who demonstrated her devotion to the Lord. Jesus condemns the fake scribes, yet commends the poor widow. In these verses, widows are referred to twice. One in how they're treated and then in how they treat God.

As Jesus, evaluates these two groups, we're reminded again that Jesus sees everything. No one ever pulls one over on Him. Yet, God's values are often not ours. What He values, we often disdain or fail to even notice.

Please turn to Luke 20:45 (p. 880) and we're reading through 21:4. We want to contrast these polar opposites with two main points: **Pride entices us to make ourselves look better than we actually are & Christlikeness is evidenced by our heart's commitment.**

Pride entices us to make ourselves look better than we actually are. Our Lord didn't seek common ground with those who rejected the truth. When compassion was exhausted and invitations spurned, Jesus condemned them.

His listeners could hear the disgust in His voice. Today we think of the Pharisees and Scribes as the ultimate bad boys of the New Testament. That wasn't the case in Jesus' day. They were highly respected and esteemed leaders. It'd be like us calling out Boy Scout leaders as a group to avoid because they're such horrible people. That's how shocking it was for Jesus' audience to hear Him censure the scribes. That's because...

a. The religious leaders were the hypocrites of Jesus' day.

Long Robes are a sign of distinction. It indicated that they were part of the upper class. A worker wouldn't wear a long robe and be encumbered with such clothing. Yet, no one is surprised to find a banker or lawyer in a suit. It's what they wear. They don't do manual labor. Long robes are like that.

Public Greetings & Front Row Seats. Scribes loved to be noticed. The marketplace was the grocery store of that day. Who dresses up to go to the grocery store, especially an outdoor market? The scribes. They wanted to be referred to as Dr. Upper Class or Reverend Better Than. They didn't have a passion for personal holiness, but they longed for public acclaim.

The scribes taught that they were to be ranked in honor even above parents. If your father and teacher both needed help, you were to help your teacher first. A man's father only brought him into this world; a teacher brought him wisdom and brought him into the world to come.

They're front row seats people at church. None of this backrow stuff for them with the riff-raff. The closer to the front, the better.

Devour Widow's Houses. Widows were the most impoverished, defenseless group of that day. Their vulnerability and need for special care and protection is a constant theme in Scripture.

While scribes weren't allowed to accept money for teaching, there was nothing to prevent them from accepting gifts. Widows needed legal counsel to protect them, so the scribes found ways to get their names on legal documents. They'd mismanage their estates to pad their pockets. They took advantage of lonely widows, using them for free room and board. They accepted money from the naïve for special prayer. They'd encourage impressionable widows to give them lavish gifts far beyond their means.

Long Prayers. They were known for prayers of great length but little depth. Such prayers gave an illusion of piety, but as they were offered in pretense, they bounced off the ceiling. There's a place for long prayers. Jesus would spend whole nights in prayer. Intense, long prayer is usually private prayer.

Greater Condemnation. Because it was all a sham and they're misleading others, they'd face greater condemnation. Scripture indicates that heaven has rewards for faithfulness, and hell has levels of punishment for vileness. "*Greater condemnation*" indicates there are degrees of punishment in hell.

These words remind us that the day is coming when all will stand before God. The scribes finally got rid of Jesus and believed He'd never confront them again. They didn't consider eternity when Jesus would be there Judge.

There's a multiple tragedy here. Their hypocrisy was a sham, enabling them to deceive and exploit the sincere. Of all rackets, religious ones are the worst. These hypocrites turned God's temple into a den for thieves and religious devotion into playacting. The general public actually thought their religious leaders were godly, when in reality they were defiling and destroying their souls (Matt. 23:13-26). Scripture has continual warnings for those who use supposed service to God for selfish gain and the accolades of men.

Hypocrisy is alive and well...in the Church. J. C. Ryle (**picture**) observed, "*No sin seems to be regarded by Christ as more sinful than hypocrisy. None certainly drew forth from His lips such frequent, strong, and withering condemnation, during the whole course of His ministry*" Yet...

We're still focused on the externals. Other than small pockets of legalism, what you should wear to church is no longer a debate. It's doubtful, since much of the early church were slaves, that they were concerned about "church clothes." The only passage in the New Testament that addresses church garb is James 2, where those who look down on someone who has shabby clothes is rebuked.

The Church in America though has become Middle Class. Without realizing it, we can look down on those who are in a lower income bracket. We judge cars, clothes and even teeth. Does it really matter if someone has sleeves of tattoos, an ear, lip or a nose full of piercings? What if a man wears a hat in church? Does the Bible ever forbid that? Anyone have a chapter and verse?

What does the Bible teach about dress? Modest and appropriate. We're not to draw attention to ourselves. Yet, we need to be culturally sensitive and be willing to sacrifice personal freedom to be non-offensive. For example this summer during my Sabbatical, I plan to visit various churches. In an African-American church, it's offensive to not wear a suit and tie. It's what it means to be incarnational, seeking to not offend or draw attention to ourselves.

We're still hung up on being noticed. It's true that some churches aren't friendly and can be a closed circle. May that never be us! Yet, our sin nature breeds narcissism. We want to be noticed. We want to be in positions fitting with who that we think we are.

Does it bother you when you help out on a project and no one thanks you, and you're somehow overlooked? We need to ask, "Who did I really do it for?" If I did it to be noticed, I have the wrong motive. If I did it for the Lord, I know that He noticed. The Bible commands us to serve the Lord and others. And serving usually means that I need to initiate, not wait to be asked.

Consumer Christianity causes us to desire the front row. The most common question, even if it's not verbalized, for the contemporary Christian is: *What am I getting out of it?* We judge a church as a "good" one if they sing the music we like. Or, if they have programs for us or our kids.

I have a dear friend in the ministry who recently reached out to me with a heavy heart. His church has an older congregation with few children. He'd asked a couple if they'd help the church start a children's program. They said, "No, it wasn't their gift." He called me when, though they would not be part of the solution, they were leaving to go to a church that did have a kids' program. It's a consumer mentality and is epidemic in the American Church.

Just a sidebar here – it's not the church's responsibility to disciple your children. That's a parental responsibility. The church is to supplement and equip you. We can never replace parents and we're not supposed to.

There are *two questions* you should ask when you're looking for a church? First, ***Are they preaching/teaching the Word of God?*** Second, ***Are they seeking to reach their community with the gospel?*** We're pleased when God leads believers to Grace Church, yet that's not who we're seeking to reach. We're committed to equipping you so that we can partner with you as we seek together to fulfill the Great Commission and reach our community.

We must protect the vulnerable. Who are *widows* today? Naïve immature believers would fall into that category. There are media ministers who teach heresy, pushing untaught Christians to send money, often that they can't afford. If someone tells you that if you send them money, God will bless you, turn on your caution lights. Mark it down, God's greatest blessings are not in this world or on this side of eternity.

The vulnerable are single parents or those with an unsaved mate. They need our prayer support and care. They need to know that we have their back.

You're not more spiritual if you attend a weeknight Bible study or a weekly prayer meeting. Last Monday night we had our monthly Deacons Meeting. One of the sweetest parts of that meeting is when we share with each other the needs in our church and pray together.

We need to pray together. We need Grace Groups.

Yet, we live in a bedroom community. Many of you, between your job and commute, put in very long hours. It's great if you can be part of a weeknight Bible study or join us for prayer meeting, but it doesn't make someone more spiritual. We don't have spiritual classism here. Now if you're sitting home vegging in front of a screen, you probably need to re-evaluate your priorities.

Please don't let a hypocritical spiritual leader turn you off to the Lord or His Church. I hope I never fail you. More importantly, I hope that I never fail the Lord. But I might...because I have this vile sin nature.

During the last year some big name preachers were forced to resign because of sin. Jesus will never fail you. I love this quote from Warren Wiersbe (**picture**). It's often sustained me when I'm discouraged with the church. Wiersbe said, "*The church is like Noah's Ark. If it wasn't for the judgement on the outside, you wouldn't be able to stand the stench on the inside.*"

If we're honest, most of us need to confess we're like the scribes. We do our best to appear good on the outside, much of it for show. Joseph Bayly's (**picture**) words cut to the core of our souls. "*No person can foster the impression that he/she is great, then exalt a great God.*"

What the Lord is looking for is the godliness that we see in this poor widow and she didn't even know that Jesus was watching her.

Christlikeness is evidenced by our heart's commitment. "*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. And He said, 'Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on'.*"

God is the God of the little things. He used a little boy's lunch to feed 5,000, David's sling and a slave girl (**pictures**) to accomplish His purposes and bring glory to Himself. Please don't disdain the little things.

I love this story! Haddon Robinson (**picture**) said, "*The gold-medal giver in the New Testament turns out to be a woman who contributed less than a nickel.*" Try to imagine this scene. Jesus is sitting across from the temple treasury watching everyone drop in their offerings. Some of the rich people strutted up to the offering box, making an obvious show of their large gifts. They made sure everyone saw how much they give. In the midst of this, a poor widow quietly approaches one of the receptacles. We don't even know her name. Her clothes were very different from the long robes of the scribes.

James Christensen created a painting called "*The Widow's Mite*" (**picture**) in which he portrays her as a young widow. She's all alone and lives in poverty. But her eyes burn brightly with her undimmed adoration for God.

She walks quickly up to one of the receptacles and hesitates momentarily. It's not easy to do what she's about to do—give every penny she has to God. With quiet resolve she says, "Thank you God for being so good to me. I believe You will take care of me today and all my days." Then, she quickly places two small copper coins in the receptacle, slipping away into the crowd. She only gave two pennies, but her offering was much bigger than all the gold and silver given that day. Others only gave some of their riches but she gave everything she had. Wow! Those thin copper coins were the least valuable coins used in that day, like our pennies. But one of these coins is worth only a fraction of our penny. Yet, her gift was an extravagant offering.

Jesus honored her because He knew the value of a sacrifice. As He watched her drop her coins into the box, Jesus knew that in a few days He'd be paying the ultimate sacrifice when He'd be nailed to a cruel cross. Suspended between heaven and earth, He took the silver of His life and the gold of His blood, and deposited it into heaven's treasury for us.

We talk about sacrificial giving. Most of us don't know anything about sacrificial giving. I know little of it. Yet, she gave everything she had.

Please understand. God is not asking us to give like that. While most aren't called to this kind of giving, we're **all** to give. So do you give? Be honest. Would the Lord Jesus consider you a giver?

If you don't give, you're saying something frightening spiritually about money's clutch on your heart. Sometimes we convince ourselves that we can't afford to give. We've been deceived about "necessities." Did you know that Americans spend \$70 billion on our pets annually? We believe eating out is an "inalienable right." Everybody must have cable. All of us have our "necessities," but they're not.

There are 2300 references to finances or giving in the Bible. If Jesus is the Lord of your life, you have to give. Giving is the only way we can fight the idolatry of money. Giving is the only way that we can fight materialism. Giving is one way that we show that we really love Jesus.

Please don't deceive yourself that you'll give when you have more, when you're out of the financial hole you're in. Because I can almost guarantee this – if you don't give now, you won't give then. Satan will deceive you again that you can't afford to give. And please know this, we all struggle with this. We all struggle with materialism. So fight temptation and give. Step out on faith and give.

God has promised to take care of you. Do you believe that? How is it we can trust God for salvation and trust Him to take us to heaven, but can't trust Him to provide the money for the electric bill?

Conclusion: As we tie this up, please hear this. *God doesn't want your money!* He wants something much more valuable and precious. He wants your heart. He wants all of you. If you could picture putting yourself in the offering plate this morning, that's exactly what God wants.

And He's only asking you to give what's His already. If you're a parent, you'll understand this. You know how at Christmas, children want to buy their Dad a present BUT they don't have any money. Yet, they still want to give Dad a Christmas gift. So, their Dad gives them the money so then they can give their Dad a gift.

On a much greater scale, that's exactly what our Heavenly Father has done for us. Everything we have has been given to us by our Heavenly Father. He doesn't need our money, yet He knows that we need to give it. All He wants us to do is show that we trust Him, that we love Him, that we're grateful, that we understand worship and that He really is the Lord of our lives.

So give, not in a way that makes you feel good or less guilty. Give in a way that shows that Jesus Christ is the Lord of your life and pleases Him.

It could be dollar. It could be a thousand dollars. Just as He was watching that day, He's watching today. He knows your situation. Don't give Him your money. Be like that poor widow – Give Him your heart!