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The Gospel of Luke
LXXI. The Widow's Mite
Luke 20:27 – 21:4

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A new group appears on the scene to try to test Jesus. The Sadducees were of the priestly class in Israel's social hierarchy – which put them right at the top. Many of them were also quite wealthy. As a group, they were known for accepting only the first five books of the Old Testament as Scripture – the books believed to have been written by Moses himself. Which had led them to the rather controversial theological conviction that there was no such thing as the resurrection of the dead. It is regarding this particular belief that they accost Jesus in the Temple:

Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.

Now, remember, the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection – so this is not intended as a serious question. Rather it is a question designed to make the resurrection, and anyone who believes in it, look ridiculous. And they are hoping to get Jesus to take the bait.

But that's not how this scene ends up. By the end of this encounter, it is the Sadducees who have been made to look foolish. First, Jesus tells them that they are wrong in assuming that the next life will merely be a continuation of the present one: *"The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage . . ."* And then, Jesus really makes them look foolish regarding their belief that nowhere in the five books of Moses is resurrection mentioned, therefore there can be no resurrection. He points out to them something they have overlooked: *"But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living"* – meaning that if He is still their God, then they must still be alive, even after death. Once again game, set and match to Jesus. And, from this point on, no one from any of the groups opposed to Him will attempt to trap Jesus on theology again.

So Jesus now has a question for them: *"How can they say that the Christ [the Messiah] is David's son?"* And then he quotes David himself, from Psalm 110: *"The Lord said to my Lord,*

sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” Jesus then continues saying, *“David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?”* I’ll be honest – the argument Jesus is making here is not easy to follow. It gets into Hebrew vocabulary, Messianic expectations, the covenant with David, and a few other things. So let me cut straight to the point. What Jesus is basically saying to His opponents is 1) they have misunderstood what the Messiah will be – that the Messiah will not be just another earthly king like David, who will take on the Romans; and 2) what the Messiah will be is One sent from God, from David’s lineage, but who is also God Himself, before whom even David will bow down – and, not only so, but who will be taking on and defeating much greater enemies than merely Romans. That is the basic point Jesus is making – but what exactly this point is pointing us toward will only really become clear to us after we consider what happens next.

Remember Jesus is in the Temple, which is bustling with all sorts of people. A group of scribes, the religious experts of the day, go walking by in their fancy long robes. And Jesus says to the crowd around Him, *“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”* This must have caused quite a stir in the crowd. Again, the scribes were highly respected, considered to be part of the religious elite – role models for common Israelite. And Jesus tells the crowd that what they really are – are religious frauds. But it is a warning consistent with the teachings of Jesus and with the whole witness of Scripture – that God is not fooled by outward appearances of religion; that God looks upon the heart.¹ Or, as the prophet Micah put it: real religion is about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God.² And, most especially, real religion doesn’t praise God while mistreating and exploiting other human beings – especially those who are weak and vulnerable.

Speaking of which, Jesus then notices one such person coming into view. He had been watching, and hearing, the wealthy drop their tithes and offerings into the offering receptacles in the Temple. Now these receptacles were made of brass, with a big open bowl at the top where you dropped your donation in, leading to a narrow tube of brass, leading to the locked brass box at the bottom. Now, since all of this was brass, and since all the money of that day was in the form of metal coins, a substantial offering would make quite a racket – the noise announcing to one and all that someone very rich was being very generous. And Jesus is watching some of these wealthy folks making a racket, when along comes one of those people He just accused the scribes of exploiting under the cover of their outward piety – a widow. And not just a widow, but a “poor widow” – meaning that whatever ladder of social standing you might point to, she was at the bottom rung. A widow – meaning, in that male-dominated culture, a nobody. And poor – meaning, in that culture, well most any culture really – meaning the same thing, a nobody.

So there are the rich folks making a racket with their large donations – and notice, Jesus doesn’t condemn them for that, like He condemned the scribes for their hypocrisy. These rich folks, with their large offerings, were honoring God with their wealth, and supporting the work and worship of the Temple as God had instructed His people to do. And yet, even so, they are not the ones Jesus singles out for praise. Here comes this poor widow, this nobody. She takes two coins, maybe worth a penny each, and she drops them into the offering receptacle. It’s barely even enough to make a noise. And yet immediately Jesus turns to His disciples and those around Him

and says to them, *“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.”* How did Jesus know that she had given literally her last two cents to live on? Well, of course, Jesus would know this. He knows everything about us. Which, just as an aside, think about the fact that Jesus knows not only how much we give, but also how much we don’t give!

Look at her, Jesus says to the disciples. Forget the scribes and all their puffed-up religious appearances. You want to know what real religion looks like? Look at her. But what exactly is Jesus singling out about her for us to observe and to learn from? Her generosity, certainly. Again that thought that it is not just how much we give to God which matters, but also how large that gift is in relation to how much we hold back to spend on ourselves. Generosity, in God’s eyes, is not measured solely by the size of the gift, but also by the size of the sacrifice. By that measure, this widow is indeed far more generous in the eyes of God than even the most generous of the wealthy givers who are giving such large sums over on the other side of the Temple.

Sacrificial giving – not the amount we can easily afford to give, but the amount which shows that our hearts truly belong to God and not to mammon.³ Reminds me of a story I came across years ago about another widow, whose name was Eleanor Boyer, a retiree living in New Jersey. This was in USA Today, a front page story. She had recently won the New Jersey Lottery – I don’t know how much, millions of dollars. But what the paper had somehow found out, and was now reporting, was that she had, ever since then, secretly been giving all of that money away. She had anonymously donated literally millions of dollars to local charities and to her church. When the paper asked her about this, she simply said, *“I have my pension and my Social Security. I have everything I need. Why let the money sit in the bank till I die?”* Digging deeper, however, the paper had found a deeper reason for her giving. Eleanor Boyer, said the article, is a Christian who has spent her whole life faithfully serving Christ. And that in a world which loves money more than people, it was Christ who had taught her to love people more than money. The article ends with these lines: *“She heads down the street in her sensible old shoes. In this, the [Lenten] season of giving up, of going beyond, of emptying out, Eleanor Boyer looks like the richest woman in town.”*⁴ *“For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”* Look at this widow, says Jesus, for this is what God-inspired generosity really looks like. Not so much the sum, as the sacrifice.

But it’s not just her generosity, I think, but also her humility. The scribes strutting about in their long robes and enjoying everyone making a fuss over them, even the wealthy givers making those brass offering receptacles clang loudly – all, intentionally or not, drawing attention to the person in the robe or the person at the offering box. And no one sees this widow. She makes no fuss. She doesn’t call out, just in case someone might be listening, *“Well, here goes my last two cents in all the world!”* She doesn’t even stop to take a selfie holding up those two coins in order to post it on social media later. She just walks in, quietly makes her offering, and walks out – unconcerned who has seen or whether anyone has seen her. Humility.

Humility, what a quaint old-fashioned notion in this age of endless self-promotion! But Jesus singles her out, because she is not just an embodiment of generosity, but also an embodiment of what it actually means to *“walk humbly with your God.”*⁵ She is not worried about who sees, who praises, who punches the like button. She simply serves God and others. She simply does

what she does for the sake of God and others. She is not in it for the publicity, not in it for the self-esteem boost, not in it for the resume. She does what she does for God to see – and God alone.

Richard Foster, author of the Christian classic, The Celebration of Discipline, writes this – and mind you, he wrote this long before the world of social media began:

In the midst of our “celebrity culture” . . . I want to put in a word for the value of anonymity. Frankly, all this hankering to get noticed runs at cross-purposes with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Besides, it is all so mindless. Many people, for example, act as if it is some kind of honor to be on television.

My counsel is that we simply turn our back to all the brouhaha of our media-soaked society . . .

We are therefore free to live our lives quietly and profoundly. We are at ease in our hiddenness. We have no need for attention because we have learned to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value [to God] . . . To be important from a kingdom perspective we do not have to be the biggest, the best, or the most innovative. We simply do our work faithfully with all our might and we leave the rest in the hands of God.⁶

Her generosity, her humility. But I think there is one, even deeper, reason as to why Jesus singles her out – and it is this: her “all.” She gives “all.” “*Out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.*” All. So what is the significance of this “all” to Jesus and therefore to us? Two things. One, in giving all, she is the fulfillment of what Jesus talked about last week – that while we are to render to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, we are at the same time to render to God what belongs to God.⁷ And what, in our lives, belongs to God? All. As in every area of our lives, every aspect of our existence, every part of our person and every moment of our daily living – all belong to God, are to be rendered to God in joyful submission to His will and for His glory and in service to His Kingdom. This widow gives to God all, places all she has in the offering place, places all of her faith in Him to provide. All.

And the second reason I think her giving all is pointed out by Jesus is because it prophetically points back to the deeper meaning of what He said about the Messiah being David’s Lord, not merely David’s descendant. His explanation that the Messiah would be something more than what everyone was expecting, would do more to defeat Israel’s true enemies than anyone had dared dream. That, in fact, the Messiah would be no one less the Lord God Himself in human form – Jesus, child of Mary and yet also Son of God. And that, in fact, the enemies Jesus had come to defeat, to put beneath His feet, underneath His footstool, were nothing less than the greatest enemies of all humankind, in every land and in every time. Our enemies sin and death. And how would David’s Son, David’s Lord, God’s Messiah accomplish this victory? By giving up His all, all for the love of us, sacrificing it all upon His cross.

¹ I Samuel 16:7.

² Micah 6:8.

³ Luke 16:13.

⁴ Quoted in Maxie Dunnam & Kimberly Dunnam Reisman, The Workbook on Virtues & the Fruit of the Spirit (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998), p. 176.

⁵ Micah 6:8.

⁶ Richard J. Foster, "Growing Edges," Renovare, Vol. 11, No. 2 (April, 2001), p. 1.

⁷ Luke 20:19-26.