



**TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
NOVEMBER 11, 2019
THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS THEY SEEM**

MARK 12: 38-44

As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

SERMON

THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS THEY SEEM.

ON THE ONE HAND, THE PHARISEES AND SCRIBES, THE TEACHERS OF THE LAW, AS JESUS CALLS THEM, LIVED UP TO ALL 613 COMMANDMENTS OF THE HEBREW FAITH.

THEY TOOK THE TORAH, THE TEACHINGS OF MOSES, AND BUILT A FENCE AROUND THEM. THAT IS, THEY CREATED SMALLER LAWS TO MAKE SURE THEY DIDN'T GET TOO CLOSE TO BREAKING THE MORE IMPORTANT LAWS.

SOUNDS IMPRESSIVE, RIGHT? BUT, THEN, WHY WOULD JESUS SAY, “WATCH OUT FOR THE TEACHERS OF THE LAW?”

AND THEN THIS SCATHING CRITICISM OF THESE SUPPOSEDLY RIGHTEOUS AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS?

“THEY LIKE TO WALK AROUND IN FLOWING ROBES AND BE GREETED WITH RESPECT IN THE MARKETPLACES, AND HAVE THE MOST IMPORTANT SEATS IN THE SYNAGOGUES AND THE PLACES OF



HONOR AT BANQUETS. THEY DEVOUR WIDOW'S HOUSES AND FOR A SHOW MAKE LENGTHY PRAYERS. THESE MEN WILL BE PUNISHED MOST SEVERELY."

THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS THEY SEEM.

LET'S BREAK THIS DOWN.

THE PHARISEES WERE THE MOST NUMEROUS AND INFLUENTIAL OF THE RELIGIOUS GROUP OF JEWS IN JESUS' DAY. THEY WERE STRICT LEGALISTS. THEY STOOD FOR THE RIGID OBSERVANCE OF THE LETTER AND FORMS OF THE RELIGIOUS LAW. THEY WERE THE TRADITIONALISTS. **THEY WAY WE'VE DONE IT IS THE WAY WE DO IT AND WE'RE THE ONES WHO KNOW THE ONE IT IS TO BE DONE AND WE RAISE A STINK IF IT ISN'T DONE THIS WAY.** FOR THE MOST PART, THOUGH, THEY WERE KNOWN FOR THEIR COVETOUSNESS, THEIR SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND THEIR HYPOCRISY.

THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS THEY SEEM.

IN TERMS OF DRESS, THE PHARISEES WORE LAYERS OF FANCY ROBES, WITH FRINGES, TASSELS AND CLOTH BORDERS. LIKELY DESIGNED BY GUCCI.

HERE IS WHERE THE MORE RADICAL REFORMERS WERE CRITICAL OF ROMANS AND LUTHERANS BECAUSE WE, TOO, CAN GET CAUGHT UP IN THE BEAUTY OF OUR ROBES, STOLES, AND CHAUSABLES.

BUT LUTHER, AT HIS BEST, DESCRIBED PASTORS IN THIS WAY: A PASTOR IS A MEMBER OF A CONGREGATION LIKE EVERYONE ELSE. BUT SOMEONE MUST BE CALLED TO PREACH AND ADMINISTER THE SACRAMENTS. THE PASTOR IS NOT HOLIER THAN ANYONE ELSE. ORDINATION DOESN'T BESTOWS SOME SPECIAL BLESSING ON A PASTOR.

AND SO, FOR FORTY YEARS I HAVE POPPED MY COLLAR WHEN I FINISH WORSHIP AS A WAY TO REMIND MYSELF, MOST OF ALL, BUT YOU, ALSO, THAT I AM A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST JUST LIKE YOU AND, IN ADDITION, GIVEN THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PREACH AND ADMINISTER THE SACRAMENTS.



BUT THE PHARISEES DEMANDED TO BE TREATED WITH KID GLOVES, GIVEN CONSTANT PRAISE, HONORED, AND RESPECTED BY ALL. AS JESUS SAYS, THEY WANT THE BEST SEATS IN THE HOUSE. TODAY, WE WOULD CALL THEM NARCISSISTS: NEEDING CONSTANT PRAISE, ACTING ENTITLED TO SPECIAL TREATMENT, THINKING WAY TOO MUCH OF THEMSELVES, AND NOT THINKING OF ANYONE ELSE BUT THEMSELVES. THE FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF A NARCISSIST.

WHEN THEY PRAYED, THEY STOPPED IN THE STREET SO THAT EVERYONE COULD SEE THEM AND THEN UTTERED LENGTHY PRAYERS THAT WERE MEANINGLESS. AGAIN, THEY JUST WANTED TO BE SEEN AND ADMIRER.

REMINDS ME OF THE PASTOR, THE MINISTER OF MUSIC, AND THE PRESIDENT OF CHURCH COUNCIL WHO WERE ON A MISSION TRIP TO THE JUNGLES OF SOUTH AMERICA WHEN THEIR PLANE WENT DOWN. ALL THREE SURVIVED THE CRASH, BUT THEY WERE IMMEDIATELY CAPTURED BY A GROUP OF NATIVE REBELS.

THE LEADER SAID, "I'M GOING TO SHOOT ALL OF YOU, BUT BEFORE I DO, I WILL GIVE YOU ONE LAST REQUEST."

HE TURNED TO THE PASTOR AND SAID TO HIM, "WHAT IS YOUR REQUEST?"

THE PASTOR REPLIED, "I HAVE ONE SERMON I HAVE PREACHED ALL OVER THE WORLD. WHEREVER I GO, PEOPLE ASK ME TO PREACH THIS SERMON. IT TAKES ONE HOUR TO DELIVER IT. I'D LIKE TO PREACH THIS SERMON ONE LAST TIME."

"YOUR REQUEST IS GRANTED," SAID THE LEADER.

HE TURNED TO THE MINISTER OF MUSIC, "WHAT IS YOUR REQUEST?"

"I AM A GREAT SINGER," HE SAID, "I AM IN DEMAND ALL OVER THE WORLD. MY FAVORITE ORATIO IS **ELIJAH**. IT TAKES ONE HOUR TO SING ALL THE SOLO PARTS. I'D LIKE TO SING THEM ONE LAST TIME."

AND AGAIN, THE LEADER OF THE REBELS REPLIED, "YOUR REQUEST IS GRANTED."



HE THEN TURNED TO THE CHURCH COUNCIL PRESIDENT AND ASKED, “WHAT IS YOUR REQUEST?”

HE SIGHED, “I’VE HEARD BOTH THE SERMON AND THE SOLOS. SHOOT ME FIRST.”

...WHAT IS MOST PUZZLING, I THINK, IS THIS STATEMENT ABOUT “DEVOURING WIDOWS’ HOUSES.”

IN ADDITION TO THE PHARISEES, THERE WERE SCRIBES. THEY DID NOT RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT FOR THEIR WORK AS EXPERTS IN THE LAW, SO THEY SOUGHT ALTERNATIVE REVENUE STREAMS. ONE OF THEIR FAVORITES WAS TO BEFRIEND WIDOWS.

THE SCHEME WENT LIKE THIS. THEY WOULD SHOW UP AT A WIDOW’S HOUSE, ONE WITHOUT CHILDREN TO LOOK AFTER HER. BECAUSE THE SCRIBE WAS AN HONORED GUEST, IT WAS REQUIRED THAT A LAVISH MEAL BE PREPARED FOR HIM. HE WOULD, THEN, REAPPEAR REPEATEDLY, EACH TIME EATING AN EXTRAVAGANT MEAL AT THE EXPENSE OF THE WIDOW.

AND, SINCE A WIDOW OFTEN NEEDED HELP WITH LEGAL MATTERS AND SINCE THE SCRIBE WAS AN EXPERT, HE WOULD OFFER HIS SERVICES. AND, SINCE THE SCRIBE WAS SO UNDERSTANDING OF THE FINANCIAL VULNERABILITY OF THE WIDOW, HE WOULD OFFER TO WORK FOR HER ON CREDIT. THEN, WHEN THE DEBT BECAME SO LARGE THAT SHE COULD NEVER HOPE OF REPAYING IT, THE SCRIBE WOULD GRACIOUSLY AGREE TO ACCEPT THE DEED TO HER HOME AND PROPERTY AS PAYMENT, ASSURING HER SHE COULD STAY IN THE HOME.

MOST OFTEN, THOUGH, SHE HAD NO WAY TO PAY FOR THE NECESSITIES OF LIFE, SO THE WIDOWS OFTEN DIDN’T LIVE LONG AFTER LOSING THEIR HOME TO A SCRIBE.

PERHAPS THIS GIVES US A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF WHY JESUS CALLED THE SUPPOSEDLY MOST RELIGIOUS PEOPLE OF HIS DAY HYPOCRITES.

“WOE TO YOU, TEACHERS OF THE LAW AND PHARISEES, YOU HYPOCRITES! YOU GIVE A TENTH OF YOUR SPICES—MINT, DILL, AND CUMIN. BUT YOU NEGLECT THE MORE IMPORTANT MATTERS OF THE LAW— JUSTICE, MERCY, AND FAITHFULNESS.”



IN THIS CONTEXT, THE STORY OF THE WIDOW'S TWO MITES IMMEDIATELY TAKES ON A DIFFERENT MEANING THAN TRADITIONALLY GIVEN. IT IS A STORY TO HEIGHTEN JESUS' WARNING TO ALL WHO FOLLOW HIM ABOUT LEGALISTS, PEOPLE FEIGNING TO BE SPIRITUAL, RELIGIOUS PEOPLE WHO CALL OUT EVERY MINISCULE ERROR IN PROTOCOL OR POLICY, BUT LACK FORGIVENESS, KINDNESS, LOVE, GRACE, AND MERCY, BOTH THEN AND NOW. BUT TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THE WARNING, WE MUST FIRST UNDERSTAND WHAT THE WIDOW PUT INTO THE COLLECTION BOX.

TRANSLATED AS TWO MITES, OR TWO SMALL COPPER COINS, SHE PUT TWO *LEPTON* INTO THE BOX. A *LEPTA* WAS THE SMALLEST DENOMINATION OF COIN CIRCULATING IN FIRST CENTURY JUDEA. A *LEPTA* IS 1/128 OF A DENARIUS, WHICH WAS THE TYPICAL DAY WAGE FOR A DAY LABORER AT THE TIME.

A DAY LABORER AND HIS FAMILY LIVED A HAND-TO-MOUTH EXISTENCE, SO A *LEPTA* WAS 1/128 OF WHAT A FAMILY NEEDED TO SURVIVE ONE DAY. SO THE WIDOW IS DOWN TO NEXT TO NOTHING.

THE SECOND THING IS THAT JESUS SAYS, "SHE PUT IN EVERYTHING SHE HAD TO LIVE ON." THIS IS THE SUM TOTAL OF HER ASSETS, AFTER BEING SCAMMED BY A SCRIBE, AFTER BEING CHEATED OUT OF HER HOUSE AND HOME BY THE MOST HYPOCRITICAL RELIGIOUS PEOPLE OF HER DAY.

WHO WOULD BE OUR CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES? PRIESTS WHO MOLEST CHILDREN? POLITICIANS WHO GET RICH ON THE PAYMENT OF LOBBYISTS WHILE THEY ARGUE FOR CUTTING SOCIAL SECURITY AND HEALTH CARE FOR PEOPLE WITH PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS? GIANT CORPORATIONS POURING FILTH INTO THE ENVIRONMENT IN ORDER TO INCREASE THEIR PROFITS? PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES AND PHYSICIANS PEDDLING ADDICTIVE DRUGS AT INFLATED PRICES? EVANGELISTS FLIMFLAMMING PEOPLE INTO SENDING IN THEIR SEED MONEY BECAUSE GOD WILL MULTIPLY IT WHILE THEY FLY AROUND THE WORLD IN THEIR PRIVATE PLANES? "GOOD CHRISTIANS" WHO JUDGE OTHERS, LIE, AND ATTACK WITHOUT THOUGHT TO THE IMPACT OF THEIR WORDS?

JESUS SAYS, "WOE TO YOU...YOU HYPOCRITES! YOU ARE LIKE WHITEWASHED TOMBS, WHICH LOOK BEAUTIFUL ON THE OUTSIDE BUT ON THE INSIDE ARE FULL OF THE BONES OF THE DEAD AND EVERYTHING UNCLEAN."

AFTER BEING CHEATED BY THE LOVELY LOOKING RELIGIOUS CONS OF HER DAY, THE WIDOW PUTS WHAT LITTLE SHE HAS IN THE OFFERING PLATE IN AN EFFORT TO EARN HER WAY INTO HEAVEN. THIS IS **SUICIDE BY DONATION.**



NO OFFENSE TO ALL THE PREACHERS OF STEWARDSHIP SERMONS YOU MIGHT HAVE HEARD, BUT THIS IS NOT A STORY ABOUT A GENEROUS WIDOW. THIS TEACHING IS NOT MEANT TO BE AN EXAMPLE FOR US SO WE PUT MORE MONEY IN THE OFFERING PLATE THIS MORNING.

THIS STORY IS MEANT TO **TURN OUR STOMACHS** AT THE HYPOCRISY OF THOSE WHO FULFILL THE LETTER OF GOD'S LAW, BUT LACK ALL UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL OF LOVE, GRACE, MERCY, ACCEPTANCE AND FORGIVENESS. ALL THOSE WHO DOT THEIR I'S AND CROSS THEIR T'S, BUT HAVE NOT SUBMITTED TO THE SPIRIT'S PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION....

THOSE WHO GET JESUS ARE THE POOR, THE DOWN-AND-OUT, THE SUFFERING, THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE HIT BOTTOM, THE SICK, THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN BEATEN DOWN, KNOCKED OUT, AND ARE STRUGGLING TO GET BACK UP.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE FANCY CLOTHES TO BEGIN WITH AND YOU WOULDN'T EVER THINK OF TAKING THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE, AND YOU NEVER SAY LONG PRAYERS BECAUSE SOMETIMES YOU JUST STRUGGLE TO PRAY IN THE FIRST PLACE, AND IF YOU'RE NOT THINKING OF HOW TO SCAM PEOPLE IN THE WORK YOU DO, THEN WELCOME TO JESUS' BAND OF MERRY DISCIPLES!

SERMON SONG

SOMETHING MORE THAN FREE BY JASON ISBELL