

"All That She Had"

People like to judge. We judge others all time, often critically. We even judge ourselves, often very graciously and with too high of an estimation. And far too often when we judge ourselves and others, we place God way too low, and man way too high. We can care more about how others judge us, than God's perspective. We can look to receive man's praise of us, instead of looking for man to praise God. We can set up ourselves as god in our own heart.

Because of all this, we're good at setting up appearances. We know others judge us, so we craft a certain identity of ourselves. We present that concocted identity to others. Oh, never mind, that the identity might not be true. Never mind that we're presenting a false image of ourselves. We're more concerned with showing people what we want them to see of us, instead of showing them who we really are. We can be very full of ourselves, prideful in a strange way. Not really happy about who we really are, but concerned enough about what others think about us, to try to make us look like who we wished we were.

And yet ironically, even though we care so much about what others think, it's not because we really care about them. We are actually just prideful. We care what people think of us. At the end of the day we can judge others less important than ourselves.

You see we like to judge: both ourselves and others. But Scripture tells us that we are not the Judge. But there is a judge! That judge is Jesus Christ. And in our passage for today, he deals with these common human tendencies. He shows us the scribes who looked to exalt themselves before men. We know that this is such a temptation for us too. But Christ also shows us the widow who looked to humble herself before God. And so we'll contrast these two pictures. And as we do that, we'll learn about how Christ judges people, and realize that there's no one greater to please than Him.

And so let's look first this morning at Jesus' warning about the scribes: verses 38-40. Jesus describes the scribes as people looking to exalt themselves before men. These three verses are likely a summary of a longer message that Jesus told about the scribes. This longer message is recorded in Matthew chapter 23 and you can read that over this week for further reflection. But let's look at the way Jesus describes these scribes here in Mark. He has several criticisms about them that all show how they love the praise of men. In verse 38, Jesus begins by saying that they go around in long robes. Extra-biblical data tells us that these were long white robes with lots of fringe. They would have been worn by the priests and Levites, but also by these trained scribes. They effectively functioned as a sort of uniform for the scribes. They'd go around the city always in uniform, catching people's attention. The result would be that people would acknowledge them and honor them. We know how that is when we see, for example, someone in a military uniform, it catches our eye. And hopefully we all honor that military person when we see them. The scribes in their long robes would catch people's eyes too. But of course, their uniforms would serve a different purpose than our military. For our military, and for others, the uniforms don't bestow the honor on them. The military are already in an honorable position, and when we happen to see them in uniform, we just recognize that. But it seems that these scribes were trying to engineer honor. They had created an institution to be honored. And so they wore these fancy robes in an effort to solicit the praise of men.

That's what Jesus also says in verse 38. They loved greetings in the marketplaces. If you don't know the Jewish customs, that can seem rather innocent. Nothing wrong with greeting people, is there? Being friendly isn't bad, is it? Well, the greetings that Jesus is referring to is the practice at that time where people would greet the scribes with honorary titles. If they ran into a scribe, they'd greet them as either "Rabbi", or "Master", or "Father". Jesus says the scribes craved this attention. They loved being honored by the people. That became the motivation for their actions.

Jesus says the same thing in verse 39 about the synagogues and feasts. One way or another, they always found a way to have the most prominent seats. Jesus saw their hearts. They were looking to be great by exalting themselves before men. This is so different than Jesus. Jesus, rightly called Rabbi, Master, and Father, would wash his disciples' feet as an example of humble service. I can't imagine the scribes doing that.

Instead, Jesus says that they made themselves out to be holier than everyone else. In verse 40, Jesus says that they prayed long prayers, just as a pretense. In other words, they were trying to show the people how holy they were. That was the justification for why they should be honored so much! It's not that long prayers are bad in and of themselves. But the problem was the scribes' intentions. They weren't praying long prayers to please God. They were making a show of their prayers to please man. This was all a part of the identity they were manufacturing before the people. They were trying to present themselves as holy religious people who deserved honor and respect. The scribes might have fooled man, but they didn't fool God. Jesus saw their hearts.

And look at how Jesus points out their hypocrisy. Verse 40. They devoured widows' houses. For people who claimed to be so religious, and claimed to know God's laws better than anyone else, they didn't actually follow God's Law. God's Law repeatedly shows God's concern for the widow. For example, Exodus 22:22, "You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child."

How were the scribes afflicting widows? Well, they were probably taking advantage of their hospitality and generosity. You see, the scribes weren't technically allowed to be paid for their services. Jewish law prevented scribes from charging to teach God's Word. However, they were allowed to get subsidies from people to support their ministry. They were also allowed to receive hospitality and gifts from people. In fact, that was encouraged. The people were told that it was the godly thing to do to support the scribes - you know, have them over to your house to stay when they are in town, to feed them, take care of them, etc. Many people would turn over portions of their resources to the scribes for the scribes to use at their discretion. You can understand how this could be something abused, especially with widows. Scribes could prey on lonely poor widows who had genuine desires to serve God, and the scribes could take advantage of such hospitality to the extreme, literally eating the poor widows out of house and home.

And so Jesus gave his analysis of the scribes. They were in a bad place. Their religion was a sham. It was a sham. They weren't looking to please God, but to please men. They cared more about the approval of man than that of God.

But Jesus points out an interesting contrast beginning in verse 41. Jesus sits down and watches the people as they bring their financial offerings into the temple. And Jesus draws our attention to a poor widow who offers up two small copper coins. Monetarily this was of so little value, but Jesus tells us that she

gave the most of anyone! Her offering was an expression of her heart; she looked to humble herself before God as she gave her offering.

I hope you can begin to see how Mark is contrasting these two pictures: the scribes versus this widow. Jesus had just described the scribes as oppressing widows, and here a widow is immediately described. Mark is calling us to contrast these two people. We need to see the differences between the scribes and this widow. The scribes were concerned with the prideful pleasing of man. The widow was concerned with the humble pleasing of God. The scribes did everything that externally seemed glorious: robes, seats of honor, fancy greetings. But this widow's gift was externally very humble. Nothing too outwardly glorious about it.

There's also another contrast in this passage. Mark also contrasts the wealthy people and their giving, with the widows' giving. Jesus doesn't tell us about the motives of the rich people as they gave their gifts. He doesn't tell us their motives like he does with the scribes. But one thing they share in common: their act of worship had an external glory to it. But that outward glory didn't compare to the widow's gift. So meager in terms of external monetary value, but obviously not meager in Jesus' estimation.

Well what made this poor widow's gift of such value? It obviously was not the greatest in terms of monetary value: just two small Greek coins which equaled a Roman quadrans, the smallest-valued Roman coin at the time. So what made her gift the most? Well, in one sense she gave the most proportionately. Jesus says this was all she had. She didn't give just a 10% tithe. She didn't even give just 50% -- remember she had two coins, so she could have given just 1 of them and still would have surely given more than anyone else, in terms of percentage. She gave 100%; all she had.

But Jesus tells us more than this. Her gift was the greatest, not just because it was the highest percentage. Look at Jesus' contrast in verse 44. The rich gave out of their abundance, but she gave out of her poverty! This is getting at her heart. This is telling us a little bit about the woman. Giving generously is a good thing. But when we give out of our wealth and abundance, we still have our wealth and abundance to fall back on. Not this woman. For this widow to give all she had was an expression of faith. It was an expression of humility. And it was an expression of her reliance on God. God's Law, as the scribes should know, tells us time and time again of God's care and concern for the widow. This poor widow's gift out of her poverty shows that she placed her trust in God. How much provision could her two small coins really have brought her anyways? But by placing all she had in the hands of God, she was placing her very self in his hands. She was entrusting herself in the one who declares his provision for the widows of the land. That's what her gift represented.

You know as we think about this, another interesting contrast comes up. It was wrong for the scribes to take as much as they did from the poor widows. Jesus had accused them of taking too much. The scribes probably received way too large of a percentage of the widows resources than was appropriate. And yet, Jesus here says that it was right for God to receive from the widows. Jesus says that it was perfectly fitting for God to literally receive 100% of the poor widow's money. How come it was okay for God to receive this and bad for the scribes? Well, I think this reminds us an important truth that we've been learning. God demands our all. As Jesus has been teaching about the kingdom of God, that's the demand we've seen. His kingdom doesn't just demand a part of our devotion and worship. It doesn't just demand some of us. It demands our all! No human can expect that. Not the scribes or anyone else. Only God. That's really what makes the scribes actions so bad and this widow's actions so right. The scribes put themselves in the place of

God. They demanded exaltation in the eyes of man. But it is God alone who is to be exalted and praised. The widow instead realized this. She recognized God's complete demand on her life and humbled herself and literally gave of her everything! And yet this widow did not need to fear, because she had entrusted herself to the great God of the heavens and the earth - the God especially cares for the widows and the oppressed who come to him!

At the beginning of this sermon I talked about judging. I talked about our bad judging of both ourselves and others. But here we see Jesus judging. But this is a righteous judgment. In fact, that's one of Jesus' roles. He is the Judge. John 5:22 says, "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son." Jesus when he returns will judge all mankind. And here we see Jesus issuing a judgment ahead of time. To the scribes who fall into the description given here by Jesus, he issues a judgment of condemnation. In fact he says that it's a pretty bad condemnation, worse than what many others will receive!

But again notice the contrast. Jesus condemns these scribes. But to the widow, he doesn't condemn, but commend. He offers commendation and praise of this widow! This is such a beautiful picture. The scribes were looking for the wrong commendation. They sought the approval of man - and got it, in many ways. But in doing so, they were not approved by God. The widow sought approval from God, and also received it - right here from Jesus. She may not have found much commendation from the world, but she got it from where it counted, from her Lord and Savior. Can any praise of man compare to receiving the commendation of God himself?

And this is a valuable lesson for us. We must seek Christ's approval and commendation over man's. You know, it's okay to want to hear from our Lord at his return, "Well done, good and faithful servant." But we'll only hear that if we humble ourselves before God. To those who try to exalt themselves, God will humble them in condemnation. If we are to be exalted by God, we need to come humbly before him.

And yet, in and of itself, that's not enough is it? If we as sinners just come humbly before God, will that keep us from condemnation? If Christ is going to judge us, can even the most humble attitude atone for all the wrongs we have done? See that doctrine of sin comes up here again. We have all sinned. We have all incurred Christ's judgment. We all deserve eternal condemnation. That's the testimony of scripture. No amount of good deeds from this point on, no amount of humility before God, can right the wrongs we've done.

This shouldn't be too hard to understand. Just think of our own court system. If you commit a crime, say murder, a humble attitude doesn't keep you from paying the penalty for your crime. You could humble yourself before the judge. You could plead guilty. That at best might get you a reduced sentence, but it won't make you innocent. Your judgment would still be "GUILTY." It would not be, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

But the good news of the gospel is that there is forgiveness for sinners in Christ. Christ went to the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Just as Christ has compassion on the widows, and on the oppressed, he also has compassion on sinners. That compassion was expressed on the cross when he died for us. And so as we come humbly before him, we are coming to humbly request that forgiveness. We are coming humbly to take hold the forgiveness he freely offers.

And so if we are to receive the approval and commendation of Christ it is only possible because of the cross. But the cross has happened. And so this commendation is available for all who believe. Jesus calls us to respond much like

this widow. He calls us to give of our entire selves to him. He calls us to humble ourselves before him, turning from our sins to his forgiveness. And as we humble ourselves before him, he lifts us up. He offers his words of approval and commendation. There are no greater words to hear from Jesus than "You are justified! You are part of my kingdom. You are mine!" My fellow believers, be reminded of the gospel again today!

Saints of God, I'd like to finish up this sermon with some specific points of application. This application can be summarized by the command in verse 38. It says "Beware!" "Beware of the scribes." Jesus is warning us of the behavior of the scribes, so that we would not model it. In Matthew 23 Jesus says to practice what the scribes preach, not what they do. We must be on guard to not fall into the same hypocrisy and pride that the scribes did.

This is such a real danger for Christians I think. There are so many ways we can act just like these scribes. We can think so highly of ourselves, that we do everything we can to make other think this way about us too. We hide our real selves when it doesn't present the image that we want to present to someone. Let's think of some different examples. You could be the person who shows up to church on Sundays and acts like a Christian in front of other Christians, but then the rest of the week you act like a pagan in front of other pagans. Only you (and God) would know why you do this. Either you really are a pagan, and just putting up a religious front to the Christians. Or are you really a Christian that's too scared to live that way in front of non-Christians. Either way, your actions show that you are more concerned about pleasing man than God.

Another example is in parent-child relationships. Parents, are you more concerned with your children's outward behavior than their hearts? Maybe because you want your friends to think you are great parents - look at how well-behaved my kids are. Or maybe it's just more convenient for you to have well-behaved kids. Either way, that's an expression of pride. And you are probably cultivating kids that are a lot like these scribes - they learn how to put up a front of good behavior, but their hearts might be black and hardened against God, and against you. Parents need to be concerned about their children's hearts - helping them to reflect on their sinfulness and pointing them back to Jesus and his forgiveness and grace.

Of course, children, the other side of this message is a call to you as well. You might have become very good at being scribes. You might be more concerned with obeying your parents when they are watching, and have figured out all the ways to disobey them when they are not. But your obedience, and your disobedience, is ultimately done unto to your heavenly father. He sees all. He knows our hearts!

And so this is a call for each one of us to search our hearts. Are we more concerned about what others think of us - our peers, our parents, our leaders, or even our children? Is this an expression of pride in your life? Is that what drives you in life? Is that what motivates you? Shouldn't we rather seek Christ's approval? Shouldn't we rather humble ourselves before him? Shouldn't that drive us?

And so we need to beware! We need to beware the pitfall of the scribes who look to exalt themselves before men. Instead seek to humble yourself before Christ, and he will lift you up.

So if this is the case, let's really strive to be real with another. Let's try to be transparent with each other. How can we help and encourage each other, if we don't really know one another? And how can we really know one another, if we are all trying to put a false image of ourselves? If we are going to have a deeper

fellowship, we need to be real with one another. We need to let people in on our struggles. I'm not saying everyone needs to know every single sin that we deal with. But let's live consistent with who we are - we are broken people, sinful people, that have found hope and grace in Jesus.

You see, if we are just concerned about appearances at church, then we can threaten the very gospel ministry that we are here to do. How can we effectively welcome sinners to be saved by grace, if we pretend that we are all righteous, or have everything perfect?

And that's why I'm urging us to be real with each other. That means be genuine. Let people know who you really are and what you are really struggling with. Together wrestle with living out God's word by the power of Christ.

Of course a danger is that if we are real with each other, we could end up judging each other. We can look down upon other's struggles. We can give condemnation. I hope this passage reminds you that it is Christ who judges and condemns, not us. In reality, we all deserve condemnation, but if we are in Christ, we receive not condemnation, but commendation.

I hope you've been reminded of true religion today. Not about externals or the praise of men. But about genuine humility before the Lord who lifts us up. We've talked a lot in this application about the heart. Let me now conclude with a practical way to live out this true religion. James says in James 1:27, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

If we are talking today about seeking to please God, instead of man, then I couldn't preach this passage without a call to have concern for the poor and oppressed. God has a heart for the widow. We've been reminded of that again today. Let's live out this genuine service to God as James tells us. Let's us be concerned for the widow and the orphan, and all those in trouble.

Obviously we have a diaconal ministry in this church to especially take care of people in such need. Obviously contributing to the diaconal fund is one way to help the widow and others with need. But the Deacons' job is more than just handing out money. Nor is it the Deacons' job to be doing all the diaconal work in the church. No, their job is to *lead* the diaconal work of the church, not to be the only ones doing diaconal service. It isn't just Ben and Richard's job to do all the diaconal work. It would warm my heart to see them spending the primary amount of their time organizing the saints who want to serve in diaconal service.

In fact, this is one of the simplest ways you can serve in the church. Many people tell me that they don't know what their gifts are to use in serving at the church. But the diaconal service is for many people a great way to serve. You could cook a meal for a widow once a week. Or do grocery shopping for them. Or clean their house for them; or just visit them. Of course, this sort of service is not limited to just widows. There are many who have diaconal needs. Let the deacons know that you want to serve and I'm sure they can make use of you as needs arise!

Let me close with one final thought. Jesus Christ had his father's approval. God the Father said of Jesus, "This is my son in whom I am well pleased." If Christ, the one most highly approved, approves of us, what greater joy can there be! If we belong to Christ, then we have that approval. May all our service and Christian living be done in light of that great commendation! And may every act of compassion to the widows and orphans, and oppressed, be done in the name of Christ

who has had compassion on us. May our service be pleasing in his sight and by his grace. Amen.

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