

# **To Seek and to Save the Lost**

## **Beware of the Scribes**

*Luke 20:45-21:4*

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# Beware of the Scribes

## Scripture

Jesus was in the final week of his life.

After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus returned to the temple on Monday and drove out the merchants who were selling their wares and obscuring the people's access to God. This enraged the religious rulers, who then engaged in several controversies with Jesus. Afterwards Jesus warned his disciples about the scribes, in the hearing of all the people. Then Jesus contrasted the actions of the scribes with those of a poor widow.

Let's read about this incident in Luke 20:45-21:4:

**<sup>45</sup> And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, <sup>46</sup> "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, <sup>47</sup> who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."**

**21 Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, <sup>2</sup> and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. <sup>3</sup> And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. <sup>4</sup> For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." (Luke 20:45-21:4)**

## Introduction

In his commentary on *The Gospel of Luke* Kent Hughes notes that the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, one of the doctrinal standards of our denomination, states a principle rarely expressed in our day, namely, that the same sin may be more terrible when committed by one person than another.

*Question 150:* Are all transgressions of the law of God equally heinous in themselves, and in the sight of God?

*Answer:* All transgressions of the law of God are not equally heinous; but some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations are more heinous in the sight of God than others.

*Question 151:* What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?

The Catechism gives a four-part answer that Hughes summarizes as follows:

1. Some sins are more heinous than others due to the advantages of the offenders – “if they be of riper age, greater experience of grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others” – their sins are more terrible.

2. Some sins are more heinous than others due to the parties they directly offend. Blasphemy of God is heinous, but also sins “against any of the saints, particularly weak brethren, the souls of them, or any other, and the common good of all or many” are particularly heinous.

3. Some sins are more heinous than others due to the nature and quality of the sin – that is, if the sin is committed while fully knowing God’s graces and requirements, and yet doing it anyway while admitting no reparation or fault.

4. Some sins are more heinous than others due to the “circumstances of time and place. . . if in public, or in the presence of others, who are thereby likely to be provoked or defiled.”

From this we draw this sobering conclusion: sin committed by experienced Christians is greater than in others, because experienced Christians have 1) longer and therefore greater experiences of grace, 2) offend not only God, but in particular the souls of weaker brethren, 3) knowingly sin against God’s requirements, and 4) defile others through the leadership roles that go to experienced Christians.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 279–280.

My point is that sins committed by pastors, elders, ministry leaders, and mature Christians are particularly heinous. Sins committed by those in leadership is far more destructive than sins committed by those who are new Christians.

That is what was so upsetting to Jesus. The religious leaders in his day were leading others astray by their sin. And so Jesus warned his disciples about the despotic authority of the religious leadership. But then, in contrast to the conduct of the religious leaders, Jesus went on to affirm the action of a poor widow.

## Lesson

Jesus' disapproval of the scribes and approval of the poor widow in Luke 20:45-21:4 warns us about the despotic authority of religious leadership.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Avoid Condemnation from Jesus (20:45-47)
2. Seek Commendation from Jesus (21:1-4)

### I. **Avoid Condemnation from Jesus (20:45-47)**

First, avoid condemnation from Jesus.

The passage we are examining today has two parts. One part is negative, and the other part is positive. One part brings the condemnation of Jesus, and the other part brings the commendation of Jesus.

In the part about the condemnation of Jesus I want to show you Jesus' criticisms, and then I want to show you Jesus' judgment.

#### A. *Jesus' Criticisms (20:45-47b)*

First, notice Jesus' criticisms.

I mentioned earlier that during his last week on earth Jesus engaged in several controversies with each of the different religious groups. After he had successfully answered each religious group, **and**

**in the hearing of all the people** Jesus issued a warning **to his** disciples (20:45). Although Jesus' warning was in relation to the scribes (who were the theologians), it seems that it was directed to all in any position of religious leadership.

Jesus was critical of the religious leaders in a number of ways.

1. Pride (20:46)

First, Jesus was critical of their pride.

Jesus said to his disciples, **“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the market-places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts”** (20:46). Jesus was warning his disciples to watch out for religious leaders who had a massive sense of self-importance. They had massive egos, and wanted people to look up to them, and treat them with honor and respect.

We have the same struggle today. Commentator Philip Ryken says:

How deadly these attitudes are in the church, where we still face many temptations to pharisaical pride. We are called to be who we are in Christ – nothing more and nothing less. Instead, we are sometimes tempted to suggest, even in subtle ways, that we are more spiritual than we really are: more active in service, more faithful in prayer, more knowledgeable in the Scriptures, more concerned about people in need. Even if we do not insist on anyone giving us an honorary title or saving us a good seat in church, we secretly live for the flush of gratification that comes when people praise our ministry. But when our godliness gets overlooked, or when we feel that our service is unappreciated, our resentment begins to burn.<sup>2</sup>

But this is so unlike Jesus, isn't it? Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and yet he temporarily set aside the glory of heaven in

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 399–400.

order to come to earth to serve sinful persons like us. For, as Paul said of Jesus in Philippians 2:8, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Let us avoid pride so that humility may mark our lives.

## 2. Greed (20:47a)

Second, Jesus was critical of their greed.

Jesus went on to say that the religious leaders **devour widows’ houses** (20:47a). In what way did they **devour widows’ houses**? Luke did not explain what Jesus meant. Perhaps they were cheating the vulnerable widows out of their houses and estates. Or perhaps they took over the houses as pledges for debts that could not be repaid. Or perhaps they encouraged widows to make gifts beyond their means. Whatever they did, they were somehow taking possession of widows’ houses in ways that were wrong and sinful.

And of course we have that taking place in our society today. Scammers call on elderly people and widows, and take financial advantage of them. This is even done by TV evangelists. They encourage people to give to their ministry, and promise that God will bless them financially. But in the vast majority of cases they have no knowledge of the financial situation of the poor widow. And that is not right.

Jesus was really critical of greed here. Jesus literally owned only the clothes on his back and was teaching his disciples to be content with what they had. He wants us to be content with what God gives us, and not to be greedy for what we do not have and want.

## 3. Hypocrisy (20:47b)

And third, Jesus was critical of their hypocrisy.

Jesus said that the religious leaders **for a pretense make long prayers** (20:47b). Apparently, the religious leaders would **make long prayers**, in places where they could be seen of course, but it was

all a pretense. They made themselves appear pious and holy, but it was a sham. And all the more so because of the way in which they treated the widows.

Again, Philip Ryken is helpful in his comments on this section:

There is a time and a place for long prayers. No one has ever understood this better than Jesus, who sometimes spent the whole night in prayer. A prayer needs to be as long as it needs to be. Sometimes we have a lot of things to pray about, and sometimes, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we have a longing to linger in the presence of God, pouring out our praise. But our Father already knows everything about us, so simple prayers can be equally effective. Like little children who know their father's love, we can come right out and tell God our troubles, asking him for what we need. There is no inherent virtue in praying a long prayer.<sup>3</sup>

I am not so sure that long prayers are common in our day. However, praying so that others may see us or hear what we say is hypocrisy. And that is what Jesus disapproves.

We are not to be hypocritical in the way in which we serve him. We are not to have one face when we are with a certain group of people and a different face when we are with another group of people. That is hypocrisy. And Jesus was very critical of that.

So, Jesus was critical of pride, greed, and hypocrisy.

#### *B. Jesus' Judgment (20:47c)*

And second, notice Jesus' judgment.

Jesus said of those who were giving evidence of pride, greed, and hypocrisy, "**They will receive the greater condemnation**" (20:47c).

Jesus said in John 3:18, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." In other words, anyone who does not believe that Jesus is the only one who

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 400.

can save sinners stands under God's condemnation. And yet, here in Luke 20:47 Jesus says that those who are guilty of pride, greed, and hypocrisy **will receive the greater condemnation**.

The only way to escape condemnation is to repent of our sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, for there is "now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). If you have never done so, I urge you to do so today.

## II. Seek Commendation from Jesus (21:1-4)

And second, seek commendation from Jesus.

This next incident is the perfect counterpoint to Jesus' condemnation of the religious leaders. It is an incident about a poor widow, perhaps a widow whose house had been devoured, although the text does not say so.

### A. *Jesus' Observations (21:1-2)*

First, note Jesus' observations.

It is helpful to know a little about the temple in Jerusalem. The temple itself was a small building at the very center. Around the temple there were various courtyards. There was a courtyard for the Gentiles, a courtyard for the women, and so on. Commentator William Barclay said, "In the Court of the Women in the Temple there were thirteen collecting boxes known as the Trumpets. They were shaped like trumpets with the narrow part at the top and the wider part at the foot. Each was assigned to offerings for a different purpose – for the wood that was used to burn the sacrifice, for the incense that was burned on the altar, for the upkeep of the golden vessels, and so on."<sup>4</sup>

Luke said that **Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box (21:1)**. So, Jesus was near the Trumpets when he **saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box**. And

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<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 302.

then Jesus **saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins** (21:2).

This incident might have gone unrecorded, or certainly unnoticed, were it not for the comments that Jesus made about what he saw on that day in the temple.

*B. Jesus' Comments (21:3-4)*

And second, note Jesus' comments.

**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"** (21:3-4).

Jesus' comment is rather straightforward. There is nothing difficult to understand about what Jesus said. What is difficult, however, is how to apply it. We often want to minimize the impact of Jesus' comment so that we are not so pointedly affected.

Simply put, the rich gave, and perhaps gave even rather generously, and yet, after they had given, they still had money left over. On the other hand, the poor widow gave all that **she had to live on**.

Part of the difficulty for so many has to do with the fact that the poor widow gave all that **she had to live on**. What exactly does this mean? I think J. C. Ryle has the best answer. He says, "The meaning of this expression is disputed. Some think that it means that the widow gave the whole of her property. Others think that it means that she gave the whole amount of her daily income. The latter view seems the more probable one."<sup>5</sup> In other words, she probably gave her daily income, and fasted the rest of the day. And she did this because of her love for God.

I want to suggest a few observations about this poor widow for us to consider. *First, when it comes to giving, the spirit in which I give determines its value.* We are headed into tax season. When I write a check to the IRS, that agency does not care at all about my attitude.

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<sup>5</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 355.

They don't care if I grumble and complain or even cry. They just want my money! But not so with God. God looks at my heart. He searches my motives. If I give to God and grumble and complain or even cry, then God is not all pleased. But if I give cheerfully, God is thrilled and delighted in me.

*And second, the value of my giving is determined by the sacrifice which it involves.* Giving \$10 may be small change to one person, and a large sum to another person. The gifts that the rich put into the offering box really did not cost them much at all. On the other hand, the two copper coins of the poor widow cost her everything she had. The rich probably calculated how much they could afford. The poor widow gave with stunning generosity so that she could give no more. Pastor Joseph Parker of City Temple made this statement, "The gold of affluence which is given because it is not needed, God hurls to the bottomless pit; but the copper tinged with blood he lifts and kisses into the gold of eternity."<sup>6</sup>

Do you know that God has used those two copper coins and multiplied them into untold billions of dollars for the expansion of his kingdom? As the story of the poor widow has been told throughout the centuries, men and women, boys and girls have been touched by her example and given generously to God and to the expansion of his kingdom.

So, what about you? Will you respond like the poor widow?

## **Conclusion**

Therefore, having analyzed the incident of Jesus' disapproval of the scribes and approval of the poor widow in Luke 20:45-21:4, we should seek the commendation of Jesus.

Philip Ryken tells the following story in his commentary:

When I was a student at Philadelphia's Westminster Theological Seminary, I was always impressed by a framed notice in the lobby of

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<sup>6</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Luke* (New York: Revell, 1931), p. 235.

Machen Hall. The notice read as follows: “Fannie Mulder was called to Glory on October 20, 1987. In a letter from her attorney we learned that she had only the following personal property in her possession when she died, having been on title 19 for the last few years.” Then the notice listed the contents of Mulder’s apartment. She had some clothes: six robes, two sweaters, thirteen adult diapers, nineteen hospital gowns, one pair of slippers, and five pairs of socks (plus two singles). She also had some personal items: a purse, a mirror, an old thimble, a toothbrush, a comb, some soap, some powder bottles, and a pair of reading glasses. She needed the glasses so she could read her two copies of the Bible, and her Psalter for singing.

In addition to a broken radio, the only other thing Fannie Mulder had in her possession was some money. Do you know how much she had? Not much: only twelve cents – a dime and two pennies. But the lawyer explained that the old woman had drawn up a will because she felt strongly that she should invest whatever she had in the work of the kingdom of God. After the will went through probate, the seminary was the beneficiary of the dime and the two pennies, now gratefully displayed on campus as the lasting testimony of a woman who gave Jesus everything she had.<sup>7</sup>

The poor widow only had two copper coins and she gave them both to Jesus. Fanny Mulder had a lot more than two pennies. She had twelve cents, and she gave them all to Jesus too.

How much do you have? However much you, whether you give out of poverty or out of abundance, give it all to Jesus.

Jesus’ condemnation rests on each person who does not believe in him. But, according to our text today, a greater condemnation rests on those who are filled with pride, greed, and hypocrisy.

However, Jesus’ commendation rests on those who believe in him and who give to him with stunning generosity.

I pray that Jesus’ commendation may rest on each one of you. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 408–409.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp)
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**PRAYER:**

O Lord our God, today we examined a narrative in which there were two incidents. In one incident, Jesus condemned religious leaders for their pride, greed, and hypocrisy. And in the other incident, Jesus commended a poor widow for her stunning generosity.

O God, make us generous. Give us hearts that long to see your name exalted and magnified, and your kingdom expanded. Give us hearts of gratitude for who you are and what you have done for us in your Son, Jesus Christ. And may the spillover of that be generosity toward you and others.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!