

LUKE

Part 76: “The Proud and the Humble”

Luke 20:45-21:4

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Sunday, March 1, 2020 (The First Sunday of Lent)

Scripture Reading

“And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, ‘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.’ 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” (Luke 20:45–21:4, ESV).

Introduction

Today I want to begin our study of this passage by asking one of the most important questions you could ever ask. It is a question that thinkers, philosophers, and religious teachers have asked all throughout human history. That question is this: “What is God like?”

Many people have tried to answer this question by what is called “negative theology.” Negative theology describes God by describing all of the ways that God is not like us.

There is a lot we can say about God by describing the ways he is different than us. For example, we are limited in what we know. We are limited in our power. We are limited to being one place at a time.

But God is unlimited He is infinite in knowledge, power, and presence. He is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent.

This is all true, but it is not all that is true about God. Negative theology can tell us some things about God, but it can tell us nothing about his character and personality.

And this is important to know: the God of the Bible is not a force. He is a personal God.

How can we know the personality of God?

We can know God because he reveals himself to us. The Bible is God's written word that is inspired by his Spirit.

In the Old Testament, God revealed himself to be a God of mercy, grace righteousness, steadfast love, and faithfulness (Ex 34:6-7).

He is a compassionate God who defends the poor, the weak, and the need. And he is a just God who opposes the proud and the wicked.

But God decided to reveal himself in beyond just words on a page. So, the word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory in Jesus (Jn 1:14).

Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb 1:3).

So when we see Jesus as he is presented in the gospel, we are beholding the revelation of God, what his personality is like, how he thinks, what he values.

As we have journeyed through the gospel, according to Luke, we have seen a unique emphasis of how Jesus personifies God's opposition to the prideful and the powerful. He exposes religious hypocrisy while, at the same time, showing value of people who were often devalued in the society around him. People like the poor, women, children, and foreigners outside the Jewish race.

Jesus puts literal flesh on the truth that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (Jas 4:6; 1 Pt 5:5). And we are going to that truth play out in the life and ministry of Jesus today.

Exposition

1.) God Opposes the Proud

For a moment, let's review some of the context leading up to this moment in the gospel of Luke. Pretty much all of Luke 20 is about the religious leaders of Jerusalem trying to pick fights with Jesus. They don't like all the attention Jesus is getting. So, they are trying to publicly humiliate and shame him.

But it doesn't work. The Pharisees, the scribes, the priests, and the Sadducees have all failed in trying to attack Jesus.

And now, as far as Jesus is concerned, the gloves are coming off. Very loudly, and in front of all the people of Jerusalem, Jesus tells his disciples what he really thinks about the religious leaders. Let's look back at the text:

“And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, ‘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” (Luke 20:45–47, ESV).

Concerning the religious leaders, Jesus tells his disciples, to “beware” (Προσέχετε) them. Take care. Look out. Be careful. These guys are dangerous. They are dangerous because they can tempt you to become like them. And if you become like them, you will be condemned like them

Jesus calls out the religious leaders’ robes, their public greetings, their places of honor, and their long-winded prayers. These are all emblems of wealth, power, and significance, and social stature.

Long robes of religious scholars were the predecessors of academic regalia that you might see at a college commencement ceremony. Only these guys wore this stuff out in public every day of the week.

Not only did their job as religious leaders give them a place of prominence in this society, they wanted to wear something to signify their importance to people in public who didn’t know who they were.

When they went to church, they had special reserved seating. When civic and religious festivals occurred, they were the guests of honor. When they prayed, they prayed, self-serving prayers filled with pride and self-glory.

They were mini-celebrities of Jerusalem. But in Jesus’s eyes, they were the personification of hypocrisy.

Do you want to know something interesting about the word “hypocrite.” It is likely that Jesus himself invented the way that it is used now. Before the life of Jesus, it was a Greek word that referred to a play-actor who wore a mask.

Jesus uses it as a word to describe the pretending of the religious leaders. These religious leaders are mask-wearers. On the outside, they are pretending to be holy. But on the inside, they are riddled with pride and wickedness.

In reality, the religion of the scribes is a man-centered religion. The focus of their religious practice is not the glory of God, but to earn approval and acclaim from the men around them.

Now, I don’t want to suggest the practices of the religious leaders were themselves bad things. On the contrary, many of the things that they were doing are the same spiritual disciplines and rhythms that the Bible encourages God’s people to observe: scripture reading, prayer, service, generosity, worshipping in the gathering of God’s people. These are good and necessary for spiritual health. But they are only good when they are centered on God and fostering nearness to God. They are not meant to be a public performance art for the sake of impressing other people.

But Jesus is not just calling out hypocrisy and pride, he is calling out greed and the havoc it is wreaking in society. Behind the veneer of religious activity of the scribes is a worship of self, and this worship of self comes at the expense of others.

Scribes were not only religious scholars, they were also de facto lawyers, who often were placed in a position of trust in legal matters like settling an estate of a deceased man on behalf of his widow. Often, these scribes were so corrupt that they would profiteer and take advantage of those they were entrusted to serve.¹

Jesus says condemnation is coming for such people.

I doubt that you would need me to tell that hypocrisy is still an issue in our day and age.

Religious hypocrites are easy to see. There are and have always been swindlers who use the name of Jesus to profiteer from the vulnerable. There are and have always been those who preach one thing and practice another. But there are plenty of non-religious pharisees in our secular age too. Secular people can have their own set of rituals they can point to for a sense of self-righteousness and superiority while being utterly devoid of love for God and neighbor.

But we must be careful not to be pharisaical, even when we are talking about the Pharisees and scribes.

The true danger of hypocrisy is that it is a subtle and dangerous temptation for us all. It is always very easy to see the sin of hypocrisy, as long as it dwells in someone else. It is often very difficult to see hypocrisy in ourselves.

We must willfully humble our hearts before the word of God and say, “Lord, would your Spirit show me the ways that I am most prone to hypocrisy?”

God desires sincerity of heart among his people. He opposes pretense and pride. Wherever there is pride, wherever there is pretense, wherever there is hypocritical mask-wearing, those are the areas where God is opposing.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day look like they have everything on the outside, but in reality, they are poor to God.

The answer is neither lack of spiritual disciplines nor pretending to be more righteous than we are. The answer is to purposefully pursue God, personally and corporately, with humility and sincerity. And that is what we see in the next point.

¹ “The scribes are attacked for using their position as teachers to further their own prestige in both religious and secular life. At the same time they made a good thing financially out of their function as lawyers by abusing positions of trust as guardians of property; to this end they put up a show of religiosity in the hope that it would encourage people to trust them in matters of business (J. D. M. Derrett*).” I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 749.

2.) God Gives Grace to the Humble

Now, remember, Jesus is primarily talking to his disciples in this section. And the disciples have already shown that they have an unhealthy hunger for greatness. Often times they will even ask themselves or even Jesus, which one of them is the greatest.

Jesus will now show them an example of significance they would not expect. Look back at the text beginning in verse 1 of chapter 21:

“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’” (Luke 21:1–4, ESV).

Jesus is in the temple complex, watching the people as they come forward to give financial offerings. Some of the Jewish writings we have of this period describe the giving containers as metallic chests that were narrow at the top but wide at the bottom. They looked like trumpets. When wealthy people gave lots of money, in a day and age when coins were the primary currency, everyone knew it. They gave and sounded the trumpet as they gave (Mt 6:2).

So imagine, if you will, one wealthy person after another coming forward to give. As Jesus watches them, they are almost competing with one another to make the most noise. They are competing to be noticed and praised for their generosity.

Then, a little widow brings two copper coins – two pennies – and gives them to the Lord. And she is the one who is seen by Jesus. She is the one who is praised for generosity.

Now, we might think, well, of course, the widow’s gift was inherently generous. She is poor, but at least she gave something. But if we think that way, it is only because of how much the Christian gospel has changed the world.

In the ancient world, all that mattered was the money. But for Jesus, what matters most is the motivations of the heart.

Widows were uniquely vulnerable at this time in society. Often losing a husband meant losing income potential, social connections, and protection from harm. We don’t know much about this other than that she was apparently very poor.

Yet, she gives as part of her worship. She wholly entrusts herself to God. Her actions reveal that she looks to God as her provider and protector. Her hope is not her money.

Jesus sees her sincerity and her heart for God. And when no one else would have ever noticed her, he praises her and blesses her.

Jesus has taught in what is perhaps his most famous sermon about the blessing that belongs to those who are poor in Spirit (Mt 5:3). And this widow is poorness of spirit personified.

Biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes that: *"[Poorness in spirit is] ...a spiritual attitude, a disposition of soul which could be called poverty: a self-disposition which [makes] room for the Word of God...it's most essential characteristic is the profound awareness of who we are as creatures before God. This is a sense of our dependency. We exist, moment by moment, only because of the creative love and fidelity of the Father. We are, of ourselves, totally unnecessary. We are naked and powerless before the mystery of our own destiny. This awareness is harder to achieve and maintain than we might suppose. When we think about it, it seems obvious. But look at how much of our lives is built around an avoidance of this realization. We construct around ourselves a veneer of protection against the simplest of fact of all about us humans: that we don't belong to ourselves but depend upon Another."*²

Poorness in spirit is not necessarily related to a financial condition. You can be poor, but be filled with a sense of entitlement and pride that is the opposite of poorness in spirit. Likewise, you can be a materially wealthy person who carries the humility, gratitude, and sense of dependency upon God that is the essence of poorness in spirit.

To have poorness in spirit is to have an acute awareness of our own need. The poor in spirit are those who understand grace like West Texan farmer understands a gentle rain.

The opposite of this is self-confidence, self-reliance, and a refusal to sacrifice independence or control.

Poorness of spirit is a prerequisite for receiving the gift of the gospel of grace.

Now, before we move on, I do want to say a few words about the Christian spiritual discipline of generosity, and specifically, financial giving.

In the age of abuse from prosperity gospel preachers, we need to be reminded that generosity is good. Generosity has always been a part of the worship of God. It is a way we practice humility and gratitude toward God. It is a way of saying to the Lord, "All I have is yours. You are my security, not my bank account. You are my provider, not my job."

In the times of the Old Testament, financial giving allowed the temple and local synagogues to function. Finances that were given provided for priests and other servants in the temple, so that the Law of God was taught, sacrifices were made, God was worshipped, and the temple building was maintained.

² Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Some Hard Blessings: Meditations on the Beatitudes in Matthew*. (Allen, Texas: Argus, 1981), 34, 36.

For Christians today, financial giving allows the local church to function and exist. Money that is given helps provide for pastors, as well as paid and non-paid servant leaders, to be resourced to minister to God's people and the surrounding community. Financial giving allows local churches to maintain the mission and ministries of the church.

In the New Testament, Paul unashamedly encourages Christians to give financially to the local church. In the New Testament, money that is given often goes to providing for church pastors and leaders, providing for Christian mission (especially the planting of new churches), and mercy ministry to the poor.

And it is through the simple and faithful ministry of the local church, that the Christian gospel has spread throughout every continent of the globe.

When you give here, your gift is helping the gospel be declared and displayed. It allows for us to prepare sermons, coordinate worship services, organize ministry for children and students, as well as to give pastoral care to people who are in crisis. It allows us to have a facility where we can meet and worship as well as serve the community. For example, this month, in addition to gathered worship, our church facility will host a homeschool co-op, voting polling stations, and practices for a basketball team of special needs children.

But beyond the ways our church blesses our own congregation and community with our staff and facilities, our church generously supports ministries of compassion locally and internationally. We give to and partner with local non-profits. We are deeply engaged in Christian mission and church-planting efforts across the world. In fact, in this year alone, we will have given to church plants in Central America, south-east Asia, India, and East Africa.

One of our elders Dr. Milton Jones recently returned from Redeemer Christian Church in Eldoret, Kenya, which we were able to help plant with Christian Relief Fund. Milton was able to preach there and give that congregation our greetings. When he came back, he told us that not only has Redeemer Kenya planted a church, but recently, the church they planted has planted another church. That means, in church-planting terms, we are great-grandparents!

So with that said, I do want to say, "Thank you!" to our regular givers. Your financial sacrifice is making an eternal difference in the city of Amarillo and across the world! And if you have yet to practice giving, I encourage you to do so.

Christian generosity is not about you. It's not about getting something from God. It's about giving the gift of God to others. Christian generosity is motivated by a grateful worship of Christ that knows that it is more blessed to give than to receive. As Paul taught the Christians in Corinth: *"I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich"* (2 Corinthians 8:8-9, ESV).

Conclusion

God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.

This is not just a truth-claim that is taught by the Bible. It is a truth that is embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the God of glory, who came from the splendor of Heaven and was born unto Earth in a barn. He was the Holy One of Israel, who is righteous and pure, yet was willing to lay hands on the sick to heal them. He was the infinitely rich Lord of heaven and earth, who became poor for our sake and generously gave his life and rose again for our redemption. And that is why he is worthy of glory!

So, Redeemer Christian Church, in light of Christ and all that he is, may we lay down all our pride and worship him with humility. As the Apostle Paul commands us in Philippians 2: *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:5–11, ESV).

AMEN.

GC discussion starters

- 1. Read Luke 20:45-21:4. Summarize this passage in your own words.*
- 2. What is the relationship between Luke 20:45-47 and Luke 21:1-4? Why might these stories be told side by side?*
- 3. In Luke 20:45-47, Jesus tells his disciples to beware the scribes' religious hypocrisy. In what ways are God's people prone toward hypocrisy today?*
- 4. Why does Jesus value the widow's gift in Luke 21:1-4?*
- 5. What are some helpful principles for practicing righteous and worshipful generosity today (see 2 Cor 8:8-9; 9:6-11 for some helpful thoughts)?*

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