

Taking and Giving

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[0 : 00] In AD 66, the Jews rebelled against the Romans. It started in the city of Caesarea, but soon spread.

After initial Jewish victories, the Roman general Vespasian gathered three legions! It took him three years, but in AD 70 he finally conquered Jerusalem and put it to the sword.

He burned the temple to the ground. It is estimated that over a million people died in the Jewish rebellion, with up to 30,000 alone killed in the siege of Jerusalem. It was one of the bloodiest episodes in ancient history. Now, if the world's journalists had been present in Jerusalem in AD 70, they would have written newspaper columns on the causes of the Jewish uprising. But none of them, however, would have talked of the ultimate reason for the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

Because ultimately, AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem took place because God, having over the course of hundreds of years, warned the Jews of the consequences of being unfaithful to Him, used the merciless Roman army to judge them.

In the language of Jesus' parable of the evil tenants in Luke chapter 19, they had killed God's Son by nailing Him to a cross. Now, they faced their own destruction. The entire structure of the Jewish religion was being dismantled. No more scribes or Pharisees. No more temples or Sadducees. It was all gone, never to return.

[1 : 53] Our passage today in Luke 20, verse 45 to 21, verse 4, displays in miniature the corruption of the Old Testament Jewish religion and the need for it to be replaced by what it should always have been, a religion of heart devotion to God and a living relationship by faith in Him.

The heart of religion, both Old and New Testaments, is the religion of the heart. In our passage, the scribes illustrate everything that was wrong about the Jewish religion which led to its destruction. And the widow illustrates everything God is pleased with and by faith in Jesus blesses in every age. I want us to consider two things briefly today. First, everything that was wrong in verses 45 through 49, 47 rather, and then everything that was right in verses 1 through 4. And the importance of understanding this distinction for us today is vital because the cost of being wrong is too high for any of us to pay. First of all then, from the end of chapter 20, everything that was wrong, everything that was wrong. Jesus is teaching in the temple, and on one occasion in the hearing of His disciples and all the people, He says, beware of the scribes. Now, the word beware means to watch closely, to be on your guard against, to observe how they behave with a view to doing the exact opposite. Sometimes we need to view bad examples to learn what a good example is. Now, the temple in Jerusalem was full of scribes, so this is probably the last thing they wanted to hear from Jesus. From early on in His ministry,

Jesus was aware the scribes hated Him. On three occasions in Luke's gospel, Jesus has predicted that the scribes would arrest Him and hand Him over to the Romans for crucifixion. As recently as chapter 19 in verse 47, we read, now the scribes wanted to destroy Him. Now, Jesus says to the people, beware the scribes, as if to say, they are everything that's wrong with Jewish religion, and the reason God is going to destroy it once and for all. Now, the scribes were the lawyers of Jesus' day.

The Jewish society in which Jesus lived was heavily governed by the way in which the rabbis interpreted the Old Testament, a bit like a theocracy today. If anyone wanted to settle a dispute, they'd go to the scribes to find out what the laws of the rabbis said.

These scribes were the lawyers of Israel, and as we see throughout the whole of the gospel of Luke, they were extremely strict. They were religious legalists who twisted the Old Testament to make it about rules, the rules of men, rather than the grace of God. And that was bad enough, but the scribes were also teachers. They were the social influencers of Jesus' day.

[5 : 26] What chance does an ordinary Jewish man or woman have of seeing the beauty and the grace of God if their teachers teach only the severity and judgment of God? So the scribes epitomize everything that's wrong with Jewish religion. In our passage, Jesus describes them. Oh, they love to walk around in long robes. They love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honor at feasts. They're social animals. They're at the top of the pecking order. When they're in a meeting, they don't network. Sorry, they network. They don't gravitate toward those who need help. They make it straight for the rich. They're into networking. Now, we know the sort. Those who are in it for status, they love being first. They want to be first. You won't find them in the slums of Jerusalem, serving the sick and dying. In fact, you'd never see them doing anything which would require them to leave the cultured upper classes of Jerusalem's social scene. When they go to the synagogue, they insist upon the best seats in the house and to be treated as royalty, to hear the synagogue leaders saying of them, well, we are blessed and honored to have such a noted scribe with us here today.

For the scribes, their position at the head of the Jewish religion was all about outward appearance, how they appeared to others. They weren't nearly as concerned with how God viewed them as how they were viewed by men. Everything's about appearances. They're all about control and power, and if anything threatens their control and power, the social standing they have, they'll respond with violence.

Of course, because of his popularity with the common people, Jesus was threatening their status, and for that reason, among others, he had to be silenced. Let's beware of any kind of scribe-like attitude in our lives. To go back to the social gathering, let's be careful of networking, of gravitating toward the rich and the influential among us, the prominent and the popular, thinking somehow that by associating with them, we'll get a leg up on the social ladder. Rather, let's do what Jesus did. Search out the person sitting by themselves, who can offer us nothing, but needs our help.

Then we read about the scribes, who devour widows' houses, who devour widows' houses. Well, if the social aspect of the behaviour of the scribes deeply grieved Jesus, this must have angered him. The Old Testament prophets had railed against the rich in Jerusalem's attitude to the poor and how they got rich at the expense of the poor. It's one reason the tax collectors of Jesus' day were so hated. They exploited the poor, but they were just minor players. The scribes had taken the exploitation of the poor to new levels.

In Jesus' day, widows were the most vulnerable people in society. In a world with no social security system, no national health care, no government-backed pensions, widows were left with very little.

[8 : 58] And the rich, socially mobile, economically astute scribes preyed on them. You know, it's one thing to be like Robin Hood who stole from the rich to give to the poor. It's an altogether disgusting thing to steal from the poor to give to the rich. And to make matters worse, the scribes used religion as a tool of exploitation. They weren't allowed to charge for their services, but they could manipulate these vulnerable widows into signing over their houses to them using religion. They did not give anything to the poor. They took everything from the poor. The measure of the health of any nation is how it treats its most vulnerable. Our society has become less healthy the less it cares for its most vulnerable.

And the most vulnerable among us, of course, unborn children, those with terminal disease. Get rid of them, our politicians say, under the guise of compassion. Abort those children.

Euthanize the dying. Again, social justice is very high up the priority list of God. How it must have angered Jesus to see, in the name of God, the exact opposite of what was being taught in the Old Testament.

And then we read about the scribes, for a pretense they make long prayers. For a pretense they make long prayers. Religious hypocrites. You remember how Jesus criticized them in his famous Sermon on the Mount. When you pray you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others. If you'd asked the question, who prays the most in Jerusalem? The answer would come back, the scribes pray the most in Jerusalem.

But it was all a pretense. It was all down to false motives to be seen by others. Again, throughout the Old Testament, the prophets railed against the religious elite of Israel who did the right things, but from the wrong motives. Samuel, perhaps the most famous of them all, said to King Saul, to obey is better than sacrifice. King David in Psalm 51 says, you will not delight in sacrifice or I would give it. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart you will not despise.

Religious hypocrisy is the vomit of Satan.

[11:49] It is everything that was wrong about Jesus, about the religion of Judaism in Jesus' time. But the very teachers of God's law could interpret it to mean that as long as one looked good on the outside, it didn't really matter what one was like on the inside, but external appearances were more important than the heart. Whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament, the heart of religion is the religion of the heart. For as man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at your heart.

It is so easy for us to give in to the tyranny of the outward appearance. But what comes first must not be what we look like to others, but what we look like to God. Spiritual change does not come from the outside in, it comes from the inside out. When we lived in London before I was a minister, if you took the underground at busy times, when a tube stopped at a station, the announcer would say, inside out, inside out. Of course, it meant that before people came in from the outside of the tube, people from inside of the tube had to go outside to make space. And in the same way, the call of biblical Christianity is this. Inside out, inside out, the social injustice, the religious hypocrisy, the self-seeking of the scribes was all that was wrong with the Jewish religion. They were the teachers of God's people.

What hope were the people if they were learning nothing about God from the scribes except what was wrong? They would learn nothing about God's love, grace, righteousness, compassion, holiness, and mercy.

The scribes were everything that was wrong with the Jewish religion and the entire reason for the condemnation of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

It had happened before in Jewish history. During the days immediately prior to their exile in Babylon, Israel was filled with false prophets like the scribes saying, peace, peace, where there was no peace.

[14:18] The teachers of Israel blindly led the people toward their destruction. At that time, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army were the God's tools of judgment. But now once again, the teachers of Israel, the scribes, are leading the people astray. Once more, there shall be judgment and exile, but this time, far more severe than before. This time, the Roman legions shall be God's tools of judgment, and they will wreak a far greater judgment than Israel had ever experienced before. Sometimes a severe illness requires a severer treatment. Sometimes killer cure is the only option. God would not have judged Israel so harshly unless there was another way. We're not merely talking here hypothetically about historical situations, thinking that God no longer acts this way, because he does. When a church stops preaching the gospel and replaces it with a man-made message which pleases the people, tickles their ears, but gives no glory to

God, he will come in judgment to dismantle and destroy that church. Do we not see it in our own day with churches which have stopped preaching the gospel? They decline. They shut their doors. Why?

Because they are ultimately under the judgment of God. In 1880, the Free Church of Anderson Kelvin Grove was opened and consecrated. A massive building on Derby Street, with seating for over a thousand worshipers, was full to the brim every week. The famous Andrew Boner, one of the most evangelical preachers in the Free Church of Scotland, was its minister. It was a centre for vibrant worship, social outreach, church planting and world mission in the west end of Glasgow. But a succession of less evangelical ministers succeeded Andrew Boner until in 2010, the church which had become a Church of Scotland was closed and converted into flats.

I often visit Boner's grave in Sight-Till Cemetery and wonder and ask him sometimes, although he never answers, what would you make of your church as it is now? Flats. Why did it happen?

It's because successive ministers stopped preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, the glory of the love of God and the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. Oh, they may have been good churchmen, but successive ministers were not good Christians. Don't think it can't happen to us.

[17:18] It took over a hundred years for it to happen in Kelvin Grove. We must therefore continually listen to Jesus' warnings. Beware the scribes.

If that was everything that was wrong, then in 21 verses 1 through 4, we briefly see everything that was right. Everything that was right. It should be apparent that what joins these two passages together is the theme of widows. In chapter 20 verses 45 through 47, widows are being cheated by the scribes, their homes stolen. In chapter 21 verse 1 through 4, a widow places two small coins in the offering box.

In the previous passage, widows are exploited. In this passage, widows are exalted. Remember, in Jesus' day, widows were the most vulnerable members of society, but rather than being ignored and mistreated, Jesus loves the widow. The early Christian church prioritized the care of widows, forming a new office called deacon to provide for them. Widows were at the forefront of the church's social concern. During his ministry, Jesus met widows and treated them with compassion, respect, and dignity. We recall the widow of the son of Nain. Sorry, the widow of Nain, whose son had died. Jesus treated her so compassionately, he dried her tears and raised her son from the dead. Jesus told a parable about a widow and held it up as an example of persistent prayer.

Soon after his own birth, a widow called Anna had prophesied over him. The world around them may not have noticed them. In the name of their twisted religion, the scribes exploited these most vulnerable of people. But to Jesus, they were uber-precious. He came for the weak and the fragile, for the smoking flax, for the bruised reed.

[19 : 27] And Jesus is watching people putting their offerings into the collection boxes of the temple. And he sees rich people putting in vast amounts of money. Then he sees a widow and she's putting in two small copper coins. Now, when I was a boy, the smallest coin we had was a half penny. Remember the half penny? Tiny thing. You couldn't really buy much with a half penny except, surprisingly, a half penny, sweetie. Well, this widow put the equivalent of two half pennies into the collection box. A tiny amount.

Doesn't compare with the vast sums the wealthy were able to contribute. Well, they were able to put in a hundred pounds. All she could put in was a penny. What gift mattered more to Jesus? Was he interested in the hundreds of pounds the rich gave or was he more interested in the penny the widow gave? Answer, the penny the widow gave because the rich had plenty more money where that hundreds of pounds had come from, whereas the widow had nothing else left in her pocket. Perhaps she'd already been robbed by the scribes. She'd lost her home. She was living on the street. All she had was a penny and she gave it to God. The rich people sacrificed nothing to give what they did, but she sacrificed everything.

There was a widow in a place called Zarephath during the days of the prophet Elijah. There was a severe famine in Israel at the time and the prophet Elijah came to stay with her. All she had to feed herself and her son was a small bit of flour in a jar and a wee sliver of oil. Nevertheless, Elijah commanded her to make him a small loaf of bread with a wee bit of flour and a wee bit of oil and she obeyed.

She gave everything she had to live on to Elijah and as a result she discovered that her jar of flour was never empty and her jug of oil was always full. Perhaps Jesus was thinking about her when he told this part, when he told this story in Luke 21, the faithfulness of that widow of Zarephath.

Why is this widow in Luke 21 giving everything she has? Because she trusts in God's provision for her. She trusts that she'll never be the loser for putting God first in her life.

[21 : 51] She is demonstrating that the heart of her religion is the religion of her heart. As the world looks at things, she may be the most vulnerable and most insignificant person in the temple that day. But to Jesus, she's the most important because she's displaying absolute faith in and dependence upon God. As with the other widows we mentioned earlier, the heart of her religion was the religion of her heart. We don't even know her name, but Jesus does. And to him, what she did that day was more precious than all the ceremonies and all the laws of Israel combined? She gave everything she had, everything. Like the earlier parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, one might have expected Jesus to say, I tell you, this woman left that temple justified before God.

We may not have much, but we do have enough to give to God. Because we have ourselves.

Last Sunday evening, I quoted from the Christmas carol in the bleak midwinter, where we sing, what can I give him, poor as I am? What can I give him, give my heart?

This is the faith which God approves of. A faith bringing nothing to salvation other than our own emptiness and poverty and guilt. Jesus is telling us that this is the future of the kingdom of God, not in hypocritical religion of the scribes, but heart faith in God. We don't bring God anything, our gifts and talents. We bring him nothing. Even the faith with which we believe in him is a gift from himself to us. We are beggars pleading for his mercy. That's what we are, and that's what it is, trust and faith. Which of these two characters summarizes your religion today? Is it all about appearances? Or is it about your heart? Because remember, as far as God is concerned, it's what's on your inside that counts. Jesus identifies with this widow, and in more ways than we might think.

Because the hero of the story isn't the widow, although we greatly admire her faith. The hero of the story is Jesus. We need to ask ourselves the question, which type of religious practice is the best picture of Jesus' mission to the world? Why he came? Did he come in order to steal widow's houses and to establish a kingdom of religious hypocrisy? Is he the kind of Messiah who is like an ayatollah, who has come to receive earthly status, have all earthly power, and hear the applause of crowds ringing in his ears? No, he is the Messiah who almost unnoticed gives everything for us. The literal translation of verse 4 reads like this. She gave everything she had for life. She gave everything she had for life.

[25 : 29] Is this not a beautiful and haunting picture of what Jesus will soon do when, having been arrested by the religious leaders of Israel, he will give up everything he had for life by sacrificing himself on the cross to take away our sin and guilt. The scribes took everything and gave nothing.

Jesus took nothing and gave everything. He died as our substitute and our Savior to give us far more than pennies or houses, to give us forgiveness of sin, to give us meaning and hope in life, the sure and certain hope of eternal life with him. The widow is who Jesus is and what his church must be, willing to give up everything for him. Almost unnoticed, the church must demonstrate its faith by the preaching of a gospel the world considers to be foolish and the practical expression of Christ's life, love to a world lost in sin and misery. So you see, the dregs of human religion must be swept away.

And this is what Jesus will talk about in the following passage and we'll look at next week. His kingdom will come in the fullness of its grace and its love and its faith and its glory. So as we close, we want again to challenge ourselves. We all like recognition, we all like status, we all like wealth. But in the call of Jesus to give up everything to follow him, just as he gave up everything to save us. Which side of the story do you want to be on? That of the scribe whose religion is passing away and will soon be destroyed forever? Or that of the widow whose heart religion is so precious to precious to Jesus? If it's the widow, today is the day to pray for Jesus to give you a new heart.