

# Whom Do You Admire?

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Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[ 0 : 00 ] Church, turn with me in your Bibles to Luke chapter 20, Luke chapter 20, beginning at verse 45. If you're looking in the Pew Bible, page 827.

Yes. This spring, in the weeks leading up to Easter, we are looking at the closing chapters of the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus is in Jerusalem and leading up to His crucifixion and resurrection. This morning, we're looking at a short passage from chapter 20, verse 45, to chapter 21, verse 4. So, let's read these words together, Luke chapter 20, beginning at verse 45.

In the hearing of all the people, Jesus 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.

[ 1 : 21 ] 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.

Who is someone that you admire? Someone that you notice and respect? Someone you look up to and want to be like?

Someone that you proudly associate with and publicly praise? Someone that you want others to know about and come to love and appreciate? Maybe it's a professional athlete or an actor or musician, an artist.

Perhaps it's an accomplished professor, a scholar, a pioneer in your academic field. Maybe there's a political candidate or office holder who you think holds promise. Maybe it's a personal friend, a family member, or an acquaintance.

Maybe you follow them on social media, or you listen carefully whenever they speak. Unless we are complete narcissists who only think about and admire ourselves, most of us have someone else in our life that we admire, for one reason or another.

[ 2 : 43 ] And this is normal. This is part of what human beings naturally do, beginning with young children who naturally look up to their parents. And as we grow up, our horizon expands. This is part of how we learn and develop as human beings.

And it's also part of how we're meant to learn and develop as Christians. As followers of Jesus, we're meant to honor and admire and emulate people who embody Christ-like character.

That's why the Apostle Paul can say things like, follow me as I follow Christ. It's not an arrogant thing that he's saying. He's recognizing the reality that we're going to follow somebody.

We're going to pattern ourselves after somebody else. And we should look to follow people who embody the characteristics of Jesus Christ. But the passage we're looking at this morning highlights a problem.

Our admiration can often be misdirected. We can admire people who we ought to beware of, and we can ignore people who we ought to admire.

[ 3 : 47 ] As one person put it, God's way of measuring reality is not our way. So I want to look at this morning's passage in two parts. Part one, the people we admire who we should beware.

That's the end of chapter 20. Part two, verses 1 to 4 of chapter 21, the people we ignore who we should admire. So first, the people we admire who we should actually beware.

Jesus is talking about the scribes in these verses. Now, the scribes were highly respected, preeminent leaders in Israelite society. A scribe was like a college professor combined with a civil lawyer and a spiritual authority figure and a city council member, all combined in one person.

Now, they weren't necessarily the wealthiest people, but they were some of the most highly respected people.

Most people back in those days were illiterate. These men could read and write, and they had read and studied, often copied and commented on the law of Moses that had been handed down for generations.

[ 5 : 03 ] Their interpretations of the Bible were influential and carried weight. Some of the scribes had political power. They were members of the Sanhedrin. That was the Jewish ruling council.

Others were consulted by the Sanhedrin for their expertise. They also had the authority to record and handle official documents. And they were distinguished from other people by the clothes they wore.

They wore flowing robes, full-length prayer shawls with tassels at the four corners. So when the scribe was walking down the street, you would look at him and you knew exactly who he was.

And in fact, when a scribe walked by on the street or walked into a room, everyone else would rise to their feet to honor him. So scribes were highly honored and admired in that society.

But Jesus says to his disciples, beware of the scribes. Don't admire them. Beware of them. Now, so far in chapter 20, Jesus has been teaching the people, crowds of people in the temple who are largely receptive and interacting with the temple leaders who are largely hostile.

[ 6 : 18 ] So over the last few weeks, we've seen several conversations that have happened about some pretty big theological topics. So Jesus tells a story, the parable of the wicked tenants that summarizes the message of the entire Old Testament in a parable.

He engages in a dialogue about religion and politics. He's discussed the meaning of marriage and the resurrection from the dead. And he concluded by challenging his hearers about the identity of the Messiah, David's son and David's Lord.

But now Jesus turns specifically to his disciples, to the people who've been following him and who've expressed loyalty to him and who've been walking with him for a long time.

But he doesn't pick up another big theological topic. He focuses in here on the motives and intentions of the heart. Why does Jesus warn his disciples, beware of the scribes?

Because what Jesus says is, despite their impressive appearances, the scribes were self-promoting and self-serving.

[ 7 : 28 ] Jesus says they love to be admired. They like to walk around in the clothes that distinguish them from other people. They love to receive honor in the various spheres of human activity, in the marketplace, the economic sphere, in the synagogue, the religious sphere, at feasts, in the social sphere.

And in all these different contexts, they love to be first. They love to be seen and known and admired and praised. But Jesus says in their love of human praise, they harm vulnerable people and they dishonor God.

Jesus says they devour widows' houses. Now, widows were some of the most vulnerable people in the ancient world. They were not only grieving the loss of companionship and partnership in marriage, they were also at risk in multiple ways.

Economically, widows had few job prospects, so their survival depended largely on two things, their inheritance, if they had one, and the generosity of others. Physically, the ancient world was a violent place, and the police could not be relied upon to protect you.

A woman without a male protector was never really safe. Legally, the testimony of women in court was not admissible under either Jewish or Roman law.

[ 8 : 57 ] And so a widow couldn't easily advocate for herself legally if she was being mistreated. Now, in the Old Testament, God had repeatedly instructed His people to care for the vulnerable.

And that included widows, that included orphans, that included foreigners, and that included the poor in general. People who didn't have much protection.

Jesus specifically said, you as my people, look out for these ones. And He spoke to the leaders in particular, do justice and show mercy to widows and fatherless children and people who are all alone, strangers in a strange land.

But these scribes were neglecting and hurting the very people whom the law of God commanded them to specifically look out for. Now, Jesus doesn't say exactly how this was happening, so different people speculate.

Did some scribes take advantage of widows' hospitality? You know, back then, you would never say no to a scribe, right? If they wanted to come over for dinner, you would feed them the best meal, right?

[10:19] You wouldn't ask questions, and you certainly wouldn't refuse them. Or did some scribes demand exorbitant fees for legal counsel?

Well, that's plausible. That still happens today. Did some scribes convince widows to let them manage their estates, but then took more than their fair share as a commission?

Well, again, the widows didn't have much legal recourse if that was happening. Now, it's possible that some scribes were intentionally malicious, preying on widows, just like some telemarketers today intentionally target the lonely and the elderly.

You know, I think it's also possible that some scribes were mostly oblivious. They were just living in their own ivory tower world. They had gradually distanced themselves from the concerns and problems of regular people.

Who were all the people? Well, they were everyone else who would stand up to honor them as they walked by. Who's important? They are. They might not have even given a thought to how their actions were affecting widows.

[11:28] You know, it's very possible to do lots of damage to vulnerable people without explicitly intending to harm them, just by being so self-absorbed that we don't consider how our actions affect people who are in different life circumstances.

But however it was happening, not only were the scribes harming vulnerable people, they were also dishonoring God. Their spirituality had become a show for a pretense, Jesus says.

They make long prayers. Now, there's nothing wrong with praying long prayers, but there is a problem when prayer, which is meant to be directed toward God, becomes a show to impress other people.

And so Jesus concludes, those who seek greater honor for themselves at the cost of helping others will ultimately receive the greater condemnation from God in the end.

Now, the example of the scribes is meant to be a warning to all of us. Jesus isn't just haranguing the scribes.

[12:39] He's speaking to his disciples, and he's saying, beware. I think it's a warning to us in two ways. First, this should cause us to reevaluate who we admire and follow.

Most of us naturally admire people who are gifted and successful. But God's Word urges us to admire people and follow people who are godly and sincere.

The Apostle Paul talks a lot about this contrast in the book of 2 Corinthians. Because the Christians in Corinth had become attracted to some teachers and preachers and public speakers who could put on a good show.

They were strong, handsome, skilled, and entertaining. But the central theme of their message was not Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Ultimately, these speakers gloried in themselves rather than seeking to glorify Christ above all. And so Paul warned the Christians in Corinth.

[13:54] He writes, Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. He says, don't admire them. Beware of them.

We should beware of people who are gifted and successful but who are not godly and sincere. Especially those who claim to be spiritual leaders.

Over the past couple of years, a couple of or several prominent Christian leaders have either renounced the faith or been removed from their ministry positions in disgrace due to personal moral failures.

Now, this isn't really a new trend. It's just become a bit more discussed in the age of social media. But it's a fair topic of concern.

How should we think about public Christian figures? Well, I think we should resist the temptation to become cynical about all public Christian figures.

[15:00] Some best-selling authors and pastors of megachurches faithfully preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and display the fruits of godly character. Praise God for them.

And if their messages help you grow in love for Christ, then listen to them and read their books and articles and commend them to others who might also be helped by them, but at the same time pray for them and don't idolize them.

Pray that they would remain faithful to Christ and not fall into temptations. Pray for the elders here at Trinity as we lead this church.

Pray that each of us would remain faithful to Christ and not fall into Satan's traps, the world's lies, and our own fleshly weakness. What does it mean to be a faithful Christian leader?

Well, to be a faithful Christian leader is like being the best man at a wedding. What's the job of the best man? Well, the best man does whatever the groom asks him to do so that the wedding can go off without a hitch.

[16:13] Right? The best man never takes center stage. The best man never tries to get the bride to fall in love with him. And in a similar way, the goal of every Christian leader is to help God's church fall in love with Jesus for the rest of her earthly life and then get out of the way.

The apostle Paul was not the most impressive personality. He battled various health problems. He may not have been the most entertaining speaker. But Paul could say to the Corinthians, we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity by the grace of God.

And later on, he said, he even uses this imagery he says, I betrothed you to one husband, even Christ. And he says, my greatest concern is that you, God's people, maintain a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

That's the kind of Christian leader that we should admire and honor and pattern ourselves after. Someone who helps each of us fall in love with Jesus and stay in love with Jesus and fix our eyes on Him every day of our lives.

[17:37] So we should reevaluate who we admire and follow. But second, we should also consider who we are becoming.

Over time, we become like the people who we most admire, for better or worse. The scribes were highly educated and intellectually competent.

They had invested time, energy, and money into studying and expanding their knowledge. They were the intellectual leaders of their day.

But they had become self-absorbed, filled with pride. They had distanced themselves from the concerns and problems of ordinary people. They were preoccupied with image management. Now, that's a danger in almost any academic setting, perhaps especially at a place like Yale. have we become puffed up by pride?

[18:47] Do we look upon others with contempt? Am I constantly seeking attention and approval from other people? But you know, the scribes hadn't just pursued a general education.

They had been specifically trained in the Bible and in theology. You might ask, well, wouldn't that help? But knowing the Bible and theology doesn't necessarily produce Christian maturity automatically.

If you've spent a lot of time studying the Bible and learning theology, maybe even getting a degree from seminary or divinity school, have you devoted a similarly strenuous effort to rooting out sin from your own heart?

cultivating godly habits and healthy relationships. You see, for most of chapter 20, Jesus was engaging with people about big theological questions.

And it's important for us to give careful attention to defining and defending the faith and to answering difficult questions that people ask about Christianity and studying the Bible carefully like Jesus models for us in the first half of this, in the early parts of the chapter.

[20:12] But Jesus is not only concerned with the rightness of our theological answers. He also cares deeply about our motives and attitudes and our integrity and our behavior.

He's concerned not only that we learn to interpret Scripture correctly, but that we also respond to Scripture faithfully. when Paul wrote to Timothy, who was a young pastor, Paul did not just say, keep a close watch on your teaching.

He said, keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Set the believers an example in your speech, yes, but also, he says, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.

So let me put it this way. If you're a student of any kind, do you diligently study your own soul in the mirror of God's Word?

One of the things that God's Word is meant to help us do is to help us see our own soul more clearly. Can you identify when ungodly motives, such as the ones embodied by the scribes, rear their ugly heads inside you?

[ 21 : 34 ] We're all battling a sinful nature. Let's not pretend it isn't there. Part of Christian growth is recognizing when sin rears its ugly head and then confessing that to God and perhaps to a trusted brother or sister in Christ who can assure us of God's forgiveness and point us to God's cleansing power and renewing grace.

Let's take a specific example. The scribes loved to be admired. What do we see when we look into our own soul?

Do we get overly attached to other people noticing us, appreciating us, thanking us for our contributions? Do we envy those who seem more outwardly gifted and successful than we are? Are we constantly living in a comparison world? Do we feel overly resentful when we are overlooked and underappreciated?

Yes, it happens. Yes, it is a genuine offense to bear. But it is also part of the human condition and part of the normal Christian life.

[ 22 : 55 ] J.C. Ryle wrote, true grace can wait for honor and cares little what it has on earth. So we see Jesus warning about the scribes, the people we might naturally tend to admire, but actually whom we should beware.

and who we are in danger of becoming like. But in the next section, chapter 21, verses 1 to 4, we see Jesus' praise of a widow, a person we might naturally ignore, who Jesus says we should actually admire.

Verse 1, Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box. Jesus is sitting in the temple, he glances up, they would have been in the court of women, which meant both women and men of Israel could come into that court, and in that court there were 13 offering boxes.

They were shaped like trumpets with the narrow end at the top and the larger end at the bottom to prevent theft. Throughout the day, people would drop in their coins, and then every so often the temple officials would come and they would empty the containers.

And so when the rich people came and dropped in a whole bunch of coins, remember no dollar bills back then, everything's coins, you would hear clink, clink, clink, clink, clink, clink, clink. But Jesus notices a poor widow, widows wore simple, there was sort of a traditional widow's clothing, she was probably wearing that, and she put in two of the smallest coins in use.

[ 24 : 42 ] Clink, clink, you could barely hear the sound. Together, these coins were worth one sixty-fourth of a day's wage for a laborer.

So think about it. One-eighth of an hourly wage if you take an eight-hour day. What's that today? Maybe a dollar or two. Enough for a coffee at McDonald's and not much else.

Most people would not have paid any attention to this widow and to her offering. Think about it. Think about the contrast. The scribes, well-educated, well-dressed, politically powerful, financially stable, highly respected male leaders. Almost certainly the widow was illiterate, poorly dressed, politically powerless, financially desperate, a visible representation of loss and emptiness, the most vulnerable of women.

Her two cents would make no meaningful difference to the annual budget of the temple. She would not make anyone's list of high-priority donors.

[ 25 : 56 ] But Jesus noticed her offering and he made a big deal about it. I mean, consider for a moment all the other things that could have been on Jesus' mind.

All the weighty theological discussions he's just had. Boy, we can get into those. All the people who are hanging on his words. All the temple leaders who hated him and wanted to do away with him. His own sense that his betrayal and suffering and death were not far away. Most of us would be easily distracted by any one of those things.

But Jesus was not too preoccupied with any of them to notice this poor widow giving two copper coins. Jesus notices people who many of us might pass by without a second thought.

You know, there are many things that God sees and values that will never make the nightly news and that will never be trending on any social media platform.

[ 27 : 07 ] But Jesus sees and Jesus notices. And so the widow in this story could sing with the writer of Psalm 40 who wrote, I am poor and needy but the Lord takes thought of me.

You see, if Jesus takes thought of us, if he sees and he notices, that's all that matters in the end. 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.

Now, what does Jesus mean by that statement? Recently, several scholars have argued that Jesus was not actually praising the widow for giving her last two cents.

Rather, he was lamenting the corrupt system that took advantage of vulnerable people like her and drained them of all their resources and left them penniless. But I think that interpretation is inconsistent with Jesus' words and also condescending toward the widow.

It's true that Jesus denounced the corruption of the temple. He overturned the tables of the money changers, confronted the temple authorities, warned against the scribes, said they were devouring widows' houses and in the next chapter, which we'll look at next week, he foretold and prophesied the destruction of the temple.

[ 28 : 31 ] But that is not the point of verses 3 and 4. If Jesus was simply lamenting the widow's gift as a sign of a corrupt system, then he was implying that she too had been duped, that she was too ignorant or cowardly to resist the influence of the scribes.

If Jesus' only concern or primary concern was to redistribute all wealth equally, he should praise those who gave out of their abundance and he should tell the widow, keep your two cents and you should demand more because you deserve more.

But that is not actually what Jesus said. Jesus did not see the widow merely as a member of an oppressed class. He saw her as a person, an image bearer of the Creator God.

And despite the hypocrisy and self-centeredness that were corrupting the temple and causing distress for people like her, which Jesus certainly highlighted those things, Jesus saw in this poor widow an expression of genuine and self-sacrificing love for God.

And so he publicly honored and praised her before all his disciples and everyone else who was listening. Think about it. When was the last time that this poor widow was noticed and publicly praised by a man who had no ulterior motives?

[ 30 : 01 ] When was the last time her contributions were sincerely appreciated and valued? You see, for many people the experience of being poor is not just about lacking material resources, it's also an experience of feeling regularly humiliated, ignored, voiceless, and hopeless.

And so truly helping people and loving people who are poor and vulnerable is not only a matter of giving people more material things, important as that may be at times, it's also a matter of honoring people rightly as Jesus does and restoring relationships that have broken down.

In most people's eyes, this widow was defined by everything she didn't have. She didn't have money. She didn't have a husband. She didn't have a well-off son who was taking care of her.

But Jesus didn't see her as a mere have-not. Jesus saw what she had and Jesus saw what she gave. This poor widow, he said, has put in more, more than all of them.

You see, in Jesus' view, the value of a gift is not the amount relative to the amounts of other people's gifts. The value of a gift is the cost.

[ 31 : 28 ] What we willingly sacrifice in order to give. The widow did not have to give her last two cents.

If she followed the law of tithing, giving 10%, she was not obligated to give anything if she only had two cents to live on. What's 10% of the smallest two coins that exist?

20%. You round down, you don't have to give anything. If she wanted to be really generous and give 50% of what she had, she could have given one coin and kept one coin.

I mean, giving 50% of all that you own is exceedingly generous, right? But she put in all. All she had to live on. Perhaps she fasted that day because she had given her last two cents.

When is the last time that you gave something away? Whether it was money, time, or a precious possession, and you felt the loss.

[ 32 : 39 ] J.C. Ryle wrote, Some persons appear to give much who in God's sight give very little. And some appear to give very little who in God's sight give very much.

many of you know we're in the middle of a building project, a capital campaign to raise money for it. That's certainly not the only worthy cause to consider giving towards, but let me just speak to us for a moment.

If you only have a little compared to others, be encouraged. Every gift, no matter how small the amount, given out of genuine love for God matters.

If God has given you a lot, be challenged. We should not think more highly of our giving than God does. Just because you give a higher dollar amount than others does not make you the most generous in God's sight.

Or maybe you wonder, well, how much exactly should I give? This story doesn't give us a rule. There is no biblical law that says you must give every last penny in your savings account to the church building project or some other worthy cause.

[ 34 : 07 ] There is plenty of room for thoughtful and prayerful discernment in light of the various responsibilities that God has given you. And just so you know, I don't know what you give to the church.

None of the pastors know who gives what amount. We want you to give freely out of love for God and not in order to be noticed by us.

Not because of any concern of our perception. but shouldn't the example of this poor widow move us to generous and sacrificial giving?

Whether it's to the building project, to the church in general, to local ministries, to global missions, to people you know personally who have real needs, I can think of a few examples in my own lifetime when I have seen someone give of their limited resources as generously and completely and wholeheartedly as this widow did.

I will not soon forget them. In 2 Corinthians 8, the apostle Paul tells us of a group of believers who despite their own limited means gave generously and exceedingly to help famine-stricken Christians in another part of the world.

[ 35 : 29 ] Paul writes, in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

For they gave according to their means and beyond their means of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints. They gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

You see, the widow in Jerusalem at the temple and the afflicted believers in Macedonia that Paul was speaking about, they gave to God what belonged to God, their very selves.

Jesus said, she put in all she had to live on. The widow wasn't looking to be admired or recognized by other people. She knew her offering would have seemed minuscule and tiny compared to almost anyone else's, but she gave anyway out of sincere love for God himself.

That is true worship. and it's a beautiful thing. And her sacrifice of love for God would one day produce a harvest that she could not even imagine.

[ 36 : 47 ] Think about all the gifts that were given in the temple that day. Which one ended up having the most lasting impact in all of human history?

undoubtedly hers. Against all odds, who would have thought? But just think how many people over the last 2,000 years have been moved to generous and sacrificial giving by this poor widow's example.

Even though she probably had no clue in her entire earthly life that her offering to God that day would have more than the most negligible impact. But you see, you cannot calculate in advance what will be the impact of an act of worship that is motivated by genuine love for God.

In the moment, it may seem completely impractical. And yet, God can bring such a great harvest if He chooses.

But you know, the greatest giver and the most wholehearted worshiper in this story was not the poor widow. The greatest giver and the most wholehearted worshiper was the one who noticed her and praised her.

[ 38 : 15 ] Because you see, we're heading toward the climax of Luke's gospel. And the climax of Luke's gospel is when the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, gives His life, is crucified, and He offers His life as a sacrifice to God on behalf of sinful human beings.

The widow had only a little. Jesus Christ had a lot. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, was eternally rich, highly exalted.

You can't get higher than that. The widow gave her last two cents, all she had, and Jesus gave all He had, which was far more. His honor, His comfort, His privileges, His very life.

He held nothing back. The widow gave, despite being ignored and mistreated by the temple authorities, Jesus gave His life on the cross surrounded by people who were taunting and ridiculing and humiliated Him.

But He stayed, and He prayed, Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing. Jesus didn't just give out of His abundance while remaining comfortable Himself.

[ 39 : 32 ] He gave a great cost to Himself until it literally killed Him. And He did it all out of the most pure love for God, His Father.

Father. Some of His last words were, Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit. He gave Himself to God in obedience, in love, on behalf of guilty and corrupt sinners.

You see, the widow gave in an environment that had become corrupted. Jesus gave His life in a world that had become corrupted for the sake of those who had been corrupted by self-centeredness and all kinds of sin that makes us guilty.

And when Jesus hung on that cross, no one who looked at Him could imagine anything good that would come out of that. And yet, Jesus' act of worship, Jesus' sacrifice of love for God on the cross has produced a harvest far beyond what anyone back then could have imagined.

We are all here today because of Jesus Christ and His self-giving love on the cross. Maybe you're only hearing this message for the very first time, but that's what Christianity is all about.

[ 41 : 06 ] That God Himself sent His only Son that Jesus willingly came and gave His life as a sacrifice on behalf of others so that our sins could be forgiven, so that we could be restored to a right relationship with God now and eternally.

The Apostle Paul put it this way, 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.

Do you see the beauty of His self-giving love? Who do you admire? Who do you look up to and want to be like?

Who do you want everyone else to know about? Who are you not ashamed to associate with and publicly praise? Do you see that Jesus is worthy of all that?

He is worthy of our admiration and honor and endless praise. Let us pray. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we praise You for warning us against our own worst tendencies, against our self-promotion and self-serving impulses that come out of our hearts, often even more than we're conscious of.

[ 42 : 43 ] love. And we praise You for the example of this poor widow, for her faithful love for you, for you pointing that out to us as an example.

But we thank You above all for Your self-giving love, that You gave everything without holding anything back. You gave us Your life, Your righteousness, Your eternal joy.

You took our sin, our guilt, and our death. What a glorious exchange. What a beautiful gift.

Lord, may we be moved to worship You, to delight in You, to honor You, to praise You. And as we honor and praise You, we pray that we would become more and more like You, that as You have loved us, that we would love one another.

In Your holy name we pray. Amen.