

Commitment of life

Mark 12.38-44

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The Bible is a book written by literate men. You could say, they were the powerful elites of their times. There are people who think that religion is the result of powerful men who create an image of God to maintain their own power.

But what did we read in the Old-Testament story today? It was about Ruth. Boaz, a Jewish man, took this poor foreign refugee under his wings.

And in the Gospel reading, we see Jesus praising a poor widow, who served God with the meagre means that she had.

In both stories it is clear that God is choosing people who are weak, poor, women in both cases. We are so used to these stories - but it is truly astonishing.

Our Holy Scriptures contradict in a radical way the idea that our faith is about men maintaining their power.



Today in the Gospel reading, we find Jesus in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. He speaks about two things - about the Jewish leaders, and about the poor widow who puts two small coins in the offering.

We can learn some important lessons for life about what Jesus teaches. He has a strong message that we must take to heart.

1. Leaders

Jesus begins by warning his disciples against the Scribes. Those were the experts in Jewish religious laws. The theologians of those days.

Of course, some of those were good people, honest, God-fearing. But many were more interested in their own profit than in being shepherds for the people. They had their own interests always in front of them.

See how Jesus describes them in Mark 12.38-39:

Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

Is it wrong to walk in a long robe as a church leader? Is it wrong to be greeted in the market? Is it bad if people give you the seat of honor? No, not really.

But Jesus criticizes the leaders because they strive for being honored. This desire for honor, for power, for position, can easily corrupt the spirit of humble service that should be at the heart of our Christian faith.

The desire for honor and power, for being number one, is also the cause of many wars. I have never heard that was were started by poor people, or by women.

The scribes, in the Gospel story, had lost sight of their priority as teachers of the law and they were enjoying their position because of the “perks” it offered. Jesus condemned this attitude.

The question here is about priorities and motivation. Jesus also warns against these theologians because ‘for the sake of appearance’ they say long prayers.

Nothing is wrong with praying long, especially if you are alone. In public it is never a good idea - it makes people fall asleep.

But those Jewish theologians would stand in the Temple, pray individually and visibly for all people, and make a good show of long prayers. So that the people would say, ‘wow that is such a spiritual man, he has been praying so long!’

We as Christians must always search our hearts why we do what we do. We must all look at ourselves, and question our motives. What we do, is it for God, or to be rich, to be famous, to be respected? Or does it serve the heart of what God wants: love, joy, peace?

Jesus also says that those religious leaders ‘devour the houses of the widows.’ Now this is absolutely wrong.

As leaders in the church of God they should live for serving God and the poor. Instead, they go into the homes of the widows to eat those homes. They ask them for money, they milk the poor, and who knows what else these men do in the homes of those widows.

To misuse widows to get a bit of money from them, is bad - because widows are vulnerable. It is hard for them to say ‘no’ when a leader of the Jewish temple comes and asks for money. How can she refuse?

The one thing that most infuriated Jesus was taking advantage of the poor. Jesus uses strong words: “They will receive a very severe condemnation.”



So as leaders, and as Christians in general, we must be very very careful. What is our motivation? How do we treat the poor, the weak? To manipulate vulnerable people is shameful.

2. Poor widows

But the scribes, those Jewish church leaders, were not prepared to give up their lives for the people they were serving. They used the people they were supposed to serve, for their own benefits.

As leaders they were supposed to be good stewards of all that God had entrusted to them, even of the people God had put under their leadership and care. But they messed up.

Then Jesus sees one of these poor widows in the temple, putting all her money in the offering. She gives all she has freely to God. Some rich people gave big amounts, but if you have millions, what does it matter to give a big amount?

But this poor widow had only two coins left, and she gave it all to God. She sacrifices her life to God. She was an amazing steward of what God had given to her.

This poor widow stands in stark contrast to the scribes. Jesus rejects the self-serving scribes and embraces the self-sacrificing widow. And if we do likewise, we follow Jesus. And by doing this, we support equity and peace. The best way to create a peaceful society and a peaceful world, is by always siding with those who are oppressed.

Jesus was watching the poor woman; she was in the women's court of the temple. We know that in that area, there were 13 offering blocks. 13 trumpets, they were called, as they looked like a trumpet. Wide on the top, narrow on the bottom where the money would go into a box.

These 13 offering boxes were for different items in the budget of the temple. Money from one box was for buying wood for the altar. Another was for helping the poor. One was for buying animals to be sacrificed, another was for keeping the temple clean.

And money was then used exactly for the reason why people gave it.

The widow had two coins - the last money she had. These coins were called Lepta, meaning 'thin ones', because they were the smallest coins in the Roman Empire.

If you worked a whole day, your salary for cleaning or working in the field, would be one dinar. One dinar was 64 leptas - so one lepta was the salary for working about 10 minutes. Not much. Very small.

The poor widow put the income for 20 minutes of work in the offering. All she had left. A 5 euro note. And Jesus praises her for this. For the woman this was a lot of money - she could have bought some bread with it. But she gave it all to God.



Her gift was precious because of her intention to give herself totally to God. The heart matters, not the amount.

Jesus does not discourage the wealthy putting in sizable amounts. That is good - the temple needed it.

Just as your church needs your support. We can learn from this poor widow. She was the hero of Jesus. She is also our hero in our Sunday School stories. But what do we learn from her?

We learn that our giving does not have much spiritual value for us if we do not actually feel the financial pain of giving.

What caught Jesus' attention and admiration was that the poor widow gave her all. She gave her life to God. Her two Lepta were not a tip, but sacrifice. And God asks us to sacrifice.

Jesus sacrificed himself for us. How do we respond to that? With a tip?

In God's sight the value of our offerings and donations lies more in upright intention and generosity of spirit than in the quantity one gives. Give Him what you can: the merit is not in whether it is big or small, but in the intention with which you give it, and whether it truly costs you something.

3. Commitment

With our money we cannot buy forgiveness, or God's blessings. St. John Chrysostom, an early church father, said in one of his sermons:

If money could purchase such things, then the woman who deposited the two small copper coins would have received nothing very large. But since it was not money but rather her intention that prevailed, that woman received everything because she demonstrated firm conviction.

How we deal with money shows our heart and our intentions. What you do with your money, expresses all your deepest values - yes, your view of God. Your love for God and people.

It can be quite painful to take our love for money under the magnifying glass. What sort of stewards are we? All we have comes from God - what do we do with our life, our time, our money, the people God has entrusted to us?

The Jewish leaders, and we church leaders, are condemned by God if we mainly care for ourselves and if we have a lack of commitment to God and to his people. As leaders we must give ourselves to God and not misuse the people and their money for their own benefit.

Imagine, those Jewish leaders - who had enough money - they even extorted money from the poor widows. The leaders would go to their homes and tell them, 'the

temple needs your money. God will bless you if you give.' Such poor women did not dare to refuse and gave money because they were forced.

If we give money to the church because it is extorted from us, will that benefit us? Not really - because in that case we give without the intention to serve God.

The poor widow is praised by Jesus for voluntarily giving to God, and for giving all she had. That is true service to God.

In her poverty she served God by giving her money away. If she had not done that, she would not have been an example of service to God - so even people who do not have much, have to make up their mind. 'what to do with the money I have? Do I live for myself or for God?'

We are all called to serve God with all we have. Church leaders must always be very careful to be an example in giving and in serving the congregation, not in milking the congregation.

And church members have the right to be sure that if you give to the church, your money is used exactly for the reason why you gave it. It will not be used for other things. You must demand to be sure.

That is why in church we need strict rules to control what happens with money. I do not want to be accused of misusing money. And you have the right to know that this does not happen.

We are together committed to God - but we must also be committed to doing what is good in the sight of man. That is why we have an accountant, and that is why our church accounts are also audited by outsiders.

Conclusion

Let me conclude. We will not misuse other people for our own benefit. We will live for serving God and for serving others. We support the poor, we side with those who are vulnerable. This choice pleases God, and is for the benefit of all people. It serves the maintenance of peace.

And what we do with our time, with our money, with our life, is absolutely crucial for our personal relationship with God. To be tightfisted when people have needs, is in direct contradiction to how God wants us to live. Let us be generous, giving, giving till it hurts. And please consider whether you might want to support your church a bit more as well.

Let us be good stewards of what God has given to us - of our life, our time, our responsibilities, our money. God has given us so much - and good stewards make sure that all people have enough. If we invest our life in looking for the wellbeing of others, we do the best we can for all people to experience love, joy, and peace.

+ Amen.