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Luke 21:1-4

Layered, Like Onions

One of the best parts of studying the Bible is the discovery of its endless layers. Scripture is, in essence, meditation literature. More than a book of morals, it draws us to contemplate on its content and, in so doing, rediscovering its Author. This relatively well-known vignette is a good example. On the surface there is one meaning, but just below is something completely different.

The first layer of meaning regards **Sacrificial Generosity**. Just like the other Synoptic Gospels, Luke follows a similar order of events. In Luke 20:1-26, Jesus's authority is questioned by the Pharisees, his loyalty is challenged by the Herodians, and his theology is contested by the Sadducees. In each instance, Jesus's worth is measured by his agreement with critics and, as such, they are incapable of truly meeting their Messiah. The old saying is true; it is impossible to hear the voice of God when we have already decided what he is going to say.

After these encounters, the story takes a surprising turn by introducing us to a lowly widow. She isn't powerful or influential, but quiet and weak. She isn't debating Jesus. She is simply worshiping in the Temple and overlooked by everyone but Christ.

The widow is among other worshipers who place their gifts in the “offering box” (vs. 1). The priests had organized several coin boxes throughout the women’s court where people could pay their tithe. The reader’s attention is drawn to the gifts of the wealthy whose coins echo throughout the Temple. Jesus, however, focuses on a specific woman. Widowhood was difficult in the ancient world as marriage and family were crucial to survival. The two small bronze coins she used were worth 1/100th of a denarius – a day’s wage. Some have suggested that with these two coins, she could only buy a small meal or maybe a handful of flour.

Jesus then elevates her gift above the others and rightly so. After all, worship requires sacrifice. Giving out of one’s abundance is easy enough, but to give sacrificially reflects one’s faith. We all make sacrifices, but what we give the most reflects our deepest affections. In fact, one of the best ways to expose idols of the heart is to audit one’s expenses. What requires the most of your resources, time, attention, and desires? That is likely your true god.

This surface-level reading is, by far, the most common approach. However, a closer examination suggests something radically different. It is not just a story about generosity; it is ultimately a story about the **Condemnation of Religious Corruption**.

When we read this familiar text, we often smile and think, “what a nice poor woman. We need more nice poor women like her in our world.” Though true, we’re missing the real sting of the passage. Remember that a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text. This is an easy text to

spiritualize and, as a result, miss the point. This passage is not primarily a lesson on generosity. It's a warning. This poor widow is a victim.

This story is sandwiched between two passages whereby Jesus condemns the religious system of his day. In the final three verses of the previous chapter, Jesus condemned the religious elites for their lust of influence and power. In their corruption they "devour widows' houses" (Luke 20:46). It is not an accident that immediately after this warning, we meet a widow who donates her final pennies and goes home to die. Think about it, how would you feel if an American preacher took money from the poor on the pretense that God would bless them? No wonder Jesus proclaimed that "they will receive the greater condemnation" (Luke 20:47b).

After the widow's gift, the narrative focuses on the Temple. While many were marveling at its structure and décor, Jesus proclaimed its destruction. The crowd only saw marble, gold, and the faith of their ancestors, but Jesus saw injustice, corruption, and the oppression of wicked religion. They honored the gifts of the wealthy whereas Jesus honored the sacrificed of its victims. "If you're looking for God," Jesus seems to be saying, "You won't find it here." It's an astounding statement for a 1st century Jew. Do not forget that a few days prior, Jesus cleansed the place of this sort of exploitation. In essence, what God will do to this Temple is what the Temple had done to this woman's home.

Corrupt systems prey on the poor often in the name of spirituality, charity, or justice. Religion, in particular, has a way of abusing the weak and the vulnerable. If we are not careful, we can be guilty of the same. Even now, corrupt religion refuses to die. How often are well-dressed preachers promising divine blessing at significant cost? At the same time, consumer religion is equally corrupt. It's easy to condemn greedy religious figures, yet it is harder to condemn consumerism in God's house. Often, we gather to be entertained, not to worship.

Yet the corruption of religion remains a temptation. After all, giving is easier than serving. No doubt, Americans in general and American evangelicals in particular, are the most generous people in the history of humanity. This is good and right and ought to be celebrated. However, giving is only part of the equation. Giving to missions is vital to missionary work, but it cannot replace personal evangelism. Supporting ministries is vital to advancing the gospel, but it cannot replace sharing one's faith. Meeting needs is an important aspect of living by faith, but it cannot replace discipleship. We cannot simply settle for being generous, we must also serve the Lord with gladness.

Ultimately, we must see how grace comes by faith and not by works. The system condemned by Jesus in this brief passage remains a persistent thorn because we naturally trust in works above grace. We want to believe that hope lies in what we do rather than in what God in Christ has done. Religion requires action in the hopes of mercy. The gospel offers mercy because of the actions of Christ. Soon, Jesus will be crucified outside the city of Jerusalem. While there, he was ridiculed by the crowd and the elites, "you who would destroy the temple and rebuilt it in three days," they screamed (Mark 15:29). The answer to corrupt religion is not reform, it is redemption.

In the end, however, Christ restores the Temple by conquering the grave. Consider the conclusion of Luke's Gospel, "And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy,⁵³ and *were continually in the temple blessing God*" (Luke 24:50-53, emphasis mine).