

Pride and Poverty
By Jason Huff
Isaiah 55:1-7, I John 2:15-17, Luke 20:45-21:4

Today's final Scripture reading is from Luke 20:45-21:4. Listen now to God's Word. "While all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples, "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely." As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.""

There are times when I wonder just how closely Christians read the Bible. Today's passage is straightforward: Jesus wasn't fond of the way the teachers of the law in His day dressed, in long flowing robes that symbolized their authority and status. But then I went out on the Internet and found out that we haven't learned much. Take a look at some of the clergy fashions I found...



When I look at pictures like these, I have to ask: what were they thinking?

Now when I say that, I realize my own problem with pride. I don't wear a robe or a suit and tie because everyone is equal before God. The pastor is no more important than anybody else, and clothing doesn't matter before God. I don't think it's wrong to laugh at preachers wearing rejects from **Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat**. But in my sinful heart, I like to think that I've gotten it right and they've got it wrong. I can get puffed up about my own righteousness. That's pride talking, which is the heart of what Jesus was attacking.

Jesus was talking about more than just colorful robes in today's lesson. He picks on the teachers of the law because they paraded around as being righteous before God. But He's not talking about them alone. He's talking about everyone who shares their attitude...everyone who lives a life centered on self. Jesus makes a three-pronged attack on the teachers of the law as a warning to us. Then He teaches a new paradigm, one that's countercultural in any age.

The first thing that Jesus warns us about is *a heart set on self-promotion*. Jesus doesn't condemn the synagogue for having a seat of honor or a banquet having a guest of honor. He's not really talking about robe fashions of the rich and famous. He condemns their attitude. Jesus says they like to be noticed for their special robes. They love the formal ritualistic greetings in the marketplace that drew attention to their piety. They crave importance. Their whole attitude is, "Look how wonderful I am!" It's the epitome of selfishness.

In the Bible, there's good pride and bad pride. Paul writes how he takes pride in the church in Corinth. He encourages believers to take pride in their own work without comparing it to anyone else's. To say that you are proud of the choices of your children, for example, isn't sinful. This pride is happiness that God is working in your life and in the lives of others around you. It's a joy when those you know make a difference and thrive in what they are doing.

On the other hand, pride that is comparative, pride that requires one person to be knocked down for another to be lifted up, is condemned throughout the Bible. The religious leaders loved their power and authority; they loved being honored because it put them above everyone else. This kind of pride derives pleasure from being on top of the heap no matter the cost. In this kind of pride, the ends justify the means. It's the difference between slowly climbing the corporate ladder and climbing on the backs of other people to scramble to the top. It's the difference between rejoicing at a friend's success and being jealous of their achievement.

What Jesus said about their pride echoes in our own ears. When I hear about how a new church is growing by leaps and bounds, am I thankful that people are coming to know Jesus Christ? Or am I only angry that my ministry isn't growing at the same rate? Do we have to be acknowledged any time we give a gift or take part in a project, or are we willing to stay behind the scenes? Is our goal glory and honor, or is it to serve the God who created us and saved us?

In honesty, our feelings are usually mixed. We want our friends to succeed, but not *too* much. We want them to be honored, but not *too* much. Christians know our hearts are divided...God is working in us so we might abandon our selfishness, but it's still there. What do we do about it? Hand it over to God. Let Him handle your pride. Let Him tell you when it's OK to be honored for a good job. Let Him tell you when your ego is getting the better of you. We can attempt to be free of pride, but it won't work unless we've given it to God. When we do that, we've begun to move ourselves out of the equation and out of the pride that clings to us.

The next warning in the passage is about *covetousness*. Despite it being in the Ten Commandments, the teachers of the law "devoured" widows' houses...they were responsible for making them even more impoverished than they already were. The text isn't clear about how they did it; experts speculate that they asked for favors in exchange for blessings and prayers, that they exploited the law to claim their property, and so on. What we know is that the religious leaders were bankrupting the people most vulnerable in their society.

In our society, we see this everywhere from televangelists asking for money from the homebound to telemarketers tricking the elderly out of their savings. Perhaps it doesn't seem like it applies to us, and if we leave it at the level of defrauding people or stealing from them, maybe it doesn't. But there's a bigger issue that must be addressed, and that's the issue of desiring what the next guy has.

None of us are immune to coveting. We don't even have to covet what our neighbor has in order to covet something...television ads make covetousness a way of life. We're promised that we're owed these things, we deserve them, and sometimes, we buy right into the life. But the problem with covetousness is, it never stops. If you're into music, there's always another MP3 or album; if you love movies, there's always another DVD or Blu-Ray; if you love books, Borders and Amazon have you covered. No matter if it's cars or computers or furniture or whatever attracts your fancy, there's always something new and greater or better to buy...another way to spend your money on something that might be a lot of fun, but not something you need.

The lesson here is that we should be conscious that our money is not ours but God's. There are physical and spiritual needs everywhere that go unmet because there's no money to deal with them. We can get overwhelmed and say, "What can one person do?" But if just a few of us were to see that our money belongs to God and spent it wisely...if that money went to projects where people hear about God and are given opportunities to move out of abject poverty, it would make a difference. The difference between devouring a widow's house and saving a widow's house may simply be the money you choose to spend on yourself – the selfishness we talked about before – versus the money you choose to invest in projects that will reap eternal dividends.

The third warning we see in this passage is this: *know your motives*. The Greek text literally says that the teachers prayed long prayers out of false pretenses. Their prayers fed their pride; they prayed long prayers because it made them look righteous. But these prayers didn't have anything to do with God. They were as much a show as the robes they wore so that they might be known as religious and be honored for their godliness.

Again, we have to be careful to understand what Jesus is condemning here. It's not long prayers. We're told to pray without ceasing, so we should strive to have God in the center of our thoughts. What's at issue here is motivation. Jesus said that prayers aren't heard because of the number of words, but the manner in which they're prayed. Prayer doesn't exist so that we can impress others. It exists so we can communicate with God, so we can pour ourselves out to Him. The Bible tells us that the prayer of the person who has humbled himself will be heard.

A couple of weeks ago, we talked briefly about our human trait of self-deception. For us to really know our motives, we have to approach them without our blinders on. We tend to act like we're pretty good people, that we are getting along OK, that everything's fine. We often do this to protect ourselves. But in the midst of our deception, we can wind up believing that we are fooling God. Sometimes it's because of sin in our lives; we don't want to give up whatever sins we enjoy. But other times, we deceive ourselves because we're wounded, we're in trouble, and we feel that we are beyond rescue. We feel like we have to put up a front. No matter what it is that causes that self-deception, it gets in the way of real relationship with others and with God.

I encourage you to find someone who can guide you on this. Who can you trust with those deep and difficult things you can't tell everyone? Who can stand beside you so that you can be honest with yourself and with God? I ask you to think on this and take the risk to invite someone to be an accountability partner this very week. Because our motives are at the heart of the actions we take, we've got to keep them in line. The very best actions we do could be spurred on by wrong motives that will catch up with us in the end. My invitation to you this week is to find another Christian brother or sister, maybe two or three, and work together to be honest before God. Doing this can be tough, but it leads us closer to the God who loves us.

The last thing we see in this passage is Jesus' comments when a widow puts two copper coins into the temple treasury. The amount the woman put into the treasury was insignificant; it would be generous to say she gave a dollar. But Jesus says her gift is larger than everyone else's who's come by that day. The rich may have given gifts a thousand times larger, but they still had plenty to spare...the widow gave everything she had.

Once again, we have to read carefully. Jesus is not creating a rule here. He is not ordering widows to give their last dollar out of duty. He's calling the crowd to a new perspective, a godly viewpoint on pride and poverty. He's calling us to a new paradigm: *seek after spiritual riches, not earthly ones, through the wholehearted love of God.*

From a worldly viewpoint, Warren Buffett has the record on gift-giving. Once the richest man in the world, he gave away \$31 billion dollars in 2006. Now that's incredible generosity...though to be fair, he still had \$36 billion left. Now I'm not picking on Warren Buffet. He lives in a 6,000 square foot house he bought in the 1950s for \$32,000...a home that's valued around \$700,000 today, far less than most millionaires own. He's a model of frugality for someone who has incredible wealth. But the world loves folks like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates and Bono and Paul Newman because they generate *so much* money for charity.

But God's viewpoint is different. Your \$50 gift might be worth more in God's viewpoint than somebody else's \$50 million because God looks at the heart. God isn't concerned about the amount of money somebody can give in simple dollars and cents. God wants people who are in love with Him as desperately as He is in love with us. The widow at the temple is not giving her last dollar because she has to do so. The only way you can give the last of the money you have to live on to God is if you're in love with Him. When you're in love with someone, you want to spend all your time with them, you buy them gifts, you desire their happiness. When love is real, it even pulls us out of our selfishness to the point where we give everything we are so that they are blessed, even if it's not reciprocated, even if we don't personally benefit from loving them. I'm not talking about infatuation or idealistic love...but true love gets us outside of ourselves.

It's a radical change of perspective. The widow lives in poverty according to the world, but she is spiritually rich. God wants us all to be spiritually rich. Spiritual riches come from being totally in love with God. But the church, especially the American church, is in a state of spiritual poverty. We are languishing because of the things that plagued the teachers of the law – self-promotion and pride, covetousness, and worldly motives. They plague us too.

The lesson of the widow's coins is not about giving money to the church. It's about realizing that pride, lifting up one's self and following after our own desires, *is* poverty. It's moral and spiritual bankruptcy. But the opening of the Sermon on the Mount reminds us of the widow's situation – “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” When we realize that we are spiritually impoverished, when we realize the sinful self for the nothingness that it truly is, when we turn to God and find our real selves in Him and fall deeply in love with Him, we give ourselves to Him because it's the true desire of our hearts. We give our last dollar without a thought because we *know* God's incredible love for us, His care that knows no bounds. We will be spiritually rich even though we are poor in the eyes of the world.

This week, take a look at your heart. Ask God to do radical surgery on it to cut out the plague of pride in your life. Ask Him for the strength to stay on the operating table while He's doing that painful work. Ask Him to replace that pride with a love for Him that knows no bounds. I'll be doing it too. It's an operation we all need. As you ask Him, remember this promise: the Kingdom belongs to those who know their spiritual poverty and find their riches in the God who gave Himself on the cross to show us His never-ending, passionate love for us.