Luke Lesson 82 (2021)

**WARNING AGAINST THE TEACHERS OF THE LAW**

(Are You a Self-Seeker or a Seeker of God?)

Luke 20:45-21:4

Key Verse: 20:47

“They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

In the last few weeks, we’ve studied how Jewish religious leaders tested Jesus with dubious questions to trap him in his words so that they could arrest him and hand him over to death (20:1-44). These religious leaders appeared pious, yet they were evil inside. They were like venomous snakes, ready to attack their prey and devour them. In today’s passage, Jesus warns his disciples against them and predicts God’s severe judgment on them. He went even further by foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in the following passage, 21:5-38, which we will study next week. As we observe today’s passage, we see that it was a warning to his disciples for their future. In the following passage, 21:1-4, we also see how Jesus drew their attention to the poor widow's offering, saying that she had put in more than others. We usually consider the poor widow’s offering as an example we should follow. Wonder if that’s all that Jesus meant. Let’s see what warning we should take from today’s passage.

Look at verses 45 and 46. “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 with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.” It was the last week of his life on earth, his final days before his death on the cross. What did Jesus do during his final days? He was teaching in the temple. While all the people were listening to him, Jesus warned his disciples against the teachers of the law by saying, “Beware of the teachers of the law.” The teachers of the law were Bible teachers who should instruct people on what is right and the way of God, following the truth (20:21). They were supposed to be the most trusted people. Especially when you are in a crisis, you can count on their instructions and counseling. The teachers of the law in Jesus’ time were primarily Pharisees, although not all Pharisees were the teachers. So they were highly respected people, often called **“Rabbi.”** But unfortunately, Jesus had to warn that the teachers of the law in his time cannot be trusted and were the most dangerous people. Think about it. If you cannot trust your Bible teacher, whom can you trust? It was an extremely critical warning.

So, what are the reasons behind the warning? Look at verses 2-3 again. “Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at the banquets.” Why would they like to walk around in flowing robes? They didn’t have to wear special robes because they were not priests but laypeople. Yet, they still wanted to walk around in their fancy, expensive robes to display that they were special people or superior to ordinary folks. It’s a sheer demonstration of their pride. It was a group pride.

Fortunately, we don’t wear special robes in our church. However, we still have a similar tendency to seek special recognition. It’s subtle, but we call others by name and title, like pastors, missionaries, shepherds, sheep, doctors, and professors. Nothing is wrong to do so. We want to show our proper respect to others. Yet, if the title conveys the notion of superiority over others, we must be careful not to do so. Our identity as Christian disciples should be based on our authenticity- our true self, not on the title or label. Therefore, I shouldn’t be offended if someone calls me simply by the name *“David,”* not by the title *“Pastor David” or “Missionary David.”*

As we look at the following examples in verses 2 and 3, we see that they were self-glory seeking. Look at verses 2 and 3 again. “They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.” We see that these behaviors were narcissistic. Leaders are supposed to be God’s servants who serve God and his people with humility. Honor should come from God. Servants should not seek glory and honor for themselves. However, if religious or spiritual leaders are self-seeking, it’s unhealthy and disastrous to the people under their care. The teachers of the law in Jesus’ time were dangerous leaders who tried to gratify their self-seeking mentality in the name of God and at the expense of innocent victims in their synagogues. The subtle manipulation of a self-glory-seeking leader can victimize naïve and ignorant people. It’s sad to say that there are self-seeking leaders in all religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhism, etc. So we should have discernment and not follow leaders blindly.

It’s easy to criticize leaders. But is self-seeking the problem limited only to leaders? Of course not. It’s a widespread problem of all humankind. By nature, all of us are self-seekers. So, how can we avoid being self-seeking mentality? Well, the best way is to seek God’s glory intentionally. It isn’t easy and requires self-denial, humility, and patience. Romans 2:6-8 states, “God will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who, by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” Careful self-examination of our hidden motives and intentional struggle to seek God’s glory are the keys.

Look at verse 47. “They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.” This verse shows that the teachers of the law weren’t just self-seeking. They were abusive, taking advantage of the weak and vulnerable people, like widows and orphans. Jesus said that these religious leaders were devouring widows’ houses. Since Jesus didn’t say how they were devouring them, we don’t know how it happened. Yet, it illustrates that they were religious thieves. It sounds uncomfortable.

Widows, especially in Jesus’ time, didn’t have the means to survive unless they were married to someone. The religious leaders were the ones who should protect and provide for them. However, instead of giving them what they need, they took advantage of their vulnerable situation and squeezed money from them. For example, if the widow owned a house yet had no income, they would feel insecure. But if their trusted leader tells them that God would bless them even more if they offered their property to God, quoting, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, all these things will be given to you as well.” Jesus said that these leaders made a lengthy prayer when they took money from them. But who becomes rich in the end? Not widows, but only religious thieves. Jesus said, “These men will be punished most severely.”

As we read the following passage, 21:1-4, Jesus reveals the exploitation of the religious system. We remember what Jesus did when he entered the Jerusalem Temple a few days earlier. He drove out merchants and money changers and rebuked them by saying, “My house will be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers.” (19:46) The Temple business revealed the corruption of the Jewish religious system.

Look at verses 1-4. “As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ‘Truly I tell you,’ 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.’” The temple treasury was the collecting boxes located in the Court of the Women. There were thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles. People put their offerings into the mouth of the trumpet, and then the offerings drop down in the collecting box.

Historically, temple treasury was meant to serve two primary purposes. The first one was to provide the financial means to keep the temple running and support its workers, including priests, Levites, musicians, carpenters, etc. It was also meant to provide financial support for the poor, including widows and orphans. It was evident when the rich people brought their money bag and dropped many golden coins into the treasury (Pic#3). They felt proud of themselves and received VIP treatment by religious leaders, who thanked them for their generous donations. But when the poor widow dropped her two small coins, it didn’t make any sound (Pic#4). The religious leaders shook their heads and said nothing. She had to slip away, feeling embarrassed. Now, when Jesus saw this, he said, “Truly I tell you, 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.”

We are familiar with the common interpretation of this case. The poor widow’s offering of two pennies is regarded as a model of sacrificial giving to God. Jesus did praise the poor widow’s offering as much more significant than all the others because she gave everything she had. Therefore, it seems fitting to say that what Jesus tried to teach his disciples is that it’s not about how much we give but about how sacrificially we offer. And what God sees is not the amount of giving but the attitude of our hearts. True! We should give to God sacrificially and from our hearts.

Yet, I am not sure if that’s the main point that Jesus wanted to make in this context. The widow’s offering in that system was not appreciated even though she gave everything she had. Instead, she was ignored and despised because of her poverty by the religious system of the time. God commanded through the Old Testament that the poor, including the widows and orphans, be cared for. It means that God is the God of all people, both the rich and the poor. But the Jewish religious system in Jesus’ time did the opposite. The Jewish religious leaders not only despised the poor and the weak helpless but also exploited them. They made themselves rich at the expense of these poor widows’ welfare. It was a sign of complete corruption. Jesus predicted God’s impending judgment on them (20:47; 21:6). It’s scary.

Let me close the sermon. Jesus warned his disciples against the self-glory-seeking Jewish religious leaders of his time because his disciples could commit the same sin unless they took the warning seriously. The Jewish religious system failed to follow God’s truth and serve his purposes as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Instead, it became a self-righteous and abusive religious system, under which so many innocent people were victimized and invited God’s severe judgment on them. It’s a stern warning to us, Christian disciples.

So what do we take from this lesson? We are warned about the terrible consequences of the sin of pride and self-seeking mentality. It’s a serious problem. We must be intentional in fighting against our self-glory-seeking traits. We should be God-seeking in all we do, both individually and collectively. However, it’s a narrow road, which most people, even Christians, are reluctant to take. It’s not easy for us to be God-seeking all the time. However, we should never give up seeking God as our primary goal in life. When we do so, no matter what happens in this world, we will not perish but will thrive in the end.

So many things are challenging in today’s world, including the pandemic, global warming, earthquakes, floods, wildfires, the increase of violence, etc. In addition to all these, some religious thieves prey upon naïve and ignorant people. It’s time for us to wake up, examine ourselves individually and collectively. It’s time not to be self-seeking but God-seeking. From a human point of view, things are complex and challenging more than ever, but it’s an opportunity to seek God. As individual Christian disciples and as a body of Christ, we should remain faithful to God’s purpose by serving his kingdom and his righteousness. No matter what circumstances we may be in, by seeking God wholeheartedly, we can overcome anxiety, live our lives in peace, grow mature and be a good influence on others. Hebrews 11:6 states, “And without faith, it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Life is stressful. But we should ask ourselves from time to time. “*Am I a self-seeker or a seeker of God?*”