

**“Beware of the Scribes” (Luke 20:45–21:4)**

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When I was growing up, my family would occasionally go to a restaurant in Salem called Roosevelt’s. I don’t know why, but the restaurant was named after Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), the twenty-sixth president of the United States (1901–1909). I remember two things about the restaurant’s menu. I remember that they had a list of soups. On the menu, it said “New England Clam Chowder,” with a description and a price. Then, it said, “Manhattan Clam Chowder.” There was no price, and the description was something like this: “Drive 250 miles south on I-95.” I thought that was funny.

The other thing I remember about the menu at Roosevelt’s was that there were quotes by Teddy on it. There was one long quote, taken from a speech that he gave in Paris in 1910. The whole speech was titled “Citizenship in a Republic,” but the quote is better known as “The Man in the Arena.” Here it is:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.<sup>1</sup>

I appreciated it when I was young, and I’ve appreciated it every time I’ve seen it. I even saw it framed in Graceland, Elvis’s home in Memphis. The idea is that the person that counts is the one who gets in the arena and tries, even if he fails; the one who gets off the sideline and into the game; the one doesn’t simply criticize, but who gets his hands dirty. There are many people who make a living from being a critic. Think of all the talking heads on sports shows. People likely won’t remember them, but they will remember the athletes they criticize, even the ones who failed. People still remember Bill Buckner, who at the end of a long and very solid baseball

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “The Man in the Arena,” Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson University, <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Encyclopedia/Culture-and-Society/Man-in-the-Arena.aspx>.

career, made an error that will live in infamy, helping the Boston Red Sox lose game 6 of the 1986 World Series. But who remembers the names of all the talking heads who criticized Billy Buck?

Who is the man who counts? Who is the woman who matters? Roosevelt said it was the one who tried, the one “who spends himself in a worthy cause.” Who do you think are the people that matter the most?

We know what the world would think. The other day, I saw that someone had posed a question on Facebook: If you could invite five people, dead or living, to dinner, who would you invite? She put down musicians. Who would you choose? We would all probably choose famous names. A lot of us would put Jesus. Certainly, I would. I might also invite Paul, Augustine, C. S. Lewis, and perhaps a wild card, a non-Christian like Winston Churchill. Maybe an artist like Vincent Van Gogh. I don’t know. But we all tend to think of the big names, that these are the people that matter most in history.

But what if we’re wrong? What if the people that matter most are the ones who are quietly faithful to God? What if the ones who humbly give God their best portions, the ones who spend their lives for the worthiest of causes, are the people that matter most? To know whether a life has been spent for a worthy cause, we need an evaluator. Roosevelt wasn’t afraid to evaluate. But I doubt Roosevelt had perfect judgment. To know what matters most and who matters most, we need to hear from the Great Evaluator, God himself. And God has spoken on the matter. More specifically, God the Son, Jesus Christ, evaluated people. And he has told us how to spend our lives for that worthiest of causes.

This morning, we’re going to look at two short passages that are right next to each other in the Gospel of Luke. Luke tells the story of Jesus, focusing mostly on the last years of his life—or, to be more specific, his pre-resurrection life, because Jesus still lives. In the passage that we’re going to read, Jesus is in Jerusalem. It’s three days before he will be executed. Over the last few weeks, we have seen that his opponents, mostly the religious leaders of his day, have questioned him, trying to get him to say the wrong thing so that they could have him killed. But Jesus didn’t fall into their traps. Now, as the day of his death approaches, he criticizes the Jewish leaders. But he praises one unlikely person. And I think Luke wants us to see that though the religious leaders of his day were hypocrites, not everyone in Jerusalem was.

So, let’s now turn to Luke 20:45–47:

<sup>45</sup> And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, <sup>46</sup>“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, <sup>47</sup>who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is in the temple complex in Jerusalem with his disciples. He’s in the religious center of Judaism, and he publicly calls out some of the religious leaders of his day for their hypocrisy. Specifically, he mentions the scribes, which in other translations are sometimes called “teachers of the law” (NIV). They were experts of the law that God gave to Israel, generally what we call the Old Testament. They’re often associated with the chief priests and other religious leaders of Jesus’ day. When Jesus first predicted his death, he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Luke 9:22). They were among the people who wanted to “destroy” Jesus (Luke 19:47).

Here, Jesus says that the scribes are the kind of people who like to be seen as being very religious and very honorable. They like to walk around in their robes, which would signal to everyone that that they were “men of the cloth.” They loved to be greeted in marketplaces. I assume Jesus doesn’t just mean they like hearing “hello.” He means that they liked being referred to as an expert in Scripture, the way that some religious leaders insist on being called Pastor So-and-So, or Father Such-and-Such. When they attend feasts, they want the best seats, next to the host. If they attended a wedding, they want to be seated near the bridal party, not by the bathrooms. They also like to make long, showy prayers. In Matthew 6:5, part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”

In other words, what the scribes like to do is make a public impression. They want to be viewed as “holier than thou.” In our society, religious leaders aren’t very well respected by the general public. But that wasn’t the case in Judaism in first-century Palestine. The Jewish people were inherently religious. Outside of political leaders, the religious leaders were probably the closest thing to a celebrity that this society knew. They held the most favorable positions in this

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

culture. And these scribes, like the Pharisees, loved getting the attention that came along with that.

All of the charges that I've singled out so far could simply be called pride. Pride is one of the roots of many sins. It's an overinflated view of the self. Instead of humbly recognizing one's true position in the world, before God and among one's fellow men, it leads people to think they are great, more important than others, worthy of being exalted. It's singled out in the book of Proverbs as a particularly bad sin. Proverbs 8:13 says,

The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.  
Pride and arrogance and the way of evil  
and perverted speech I hate.

And Proverbs 16:18 says,

Pride goes before destruction,  
and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Pride is bad. But notice that Jesus includes another very serious charge in his condemnation of the scribes. He says that they "devour widows' houses." What does this mean? Somehow, the scribes are making widows poor, taking away their livelihood. In his commentary on Luke, Darrell Bock writes, "They take from the group most in need and leave them devastated."<sup>3</sup> Then he lists four possibilities of how the scribes did this, which are mentioned in non-biblical Jewish texts. There were widows dedicated to the temple, and the temple authorities managed their property, taking advantage of the widows. The scribes took advantage of the widows' hospitality. They "took homes as pledges of debts they knew could not be repaid."<sup>4</sup> Or they took fees for legal advice.

While we don't know exactly how the scribes were taking advantage of widows, we know that they did, and we know that this is wrong. Throughout the Bible, God says that his people should take care of widows (and orphans) because they were particularly vulnerable. There wasn't anything like social security or insurance policies to help them. Women worked, but often didn't make enough money to support themselves. They relied upon men for provision. A younger widow would need to remarry. An older widow would have to rely upon a son or other family members. The community was supposed to help widows, and God clearly

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<sup>3</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1643.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

denounces those who would take advantage of them. When they failed to do this, and did the very opposite, taking advantage of widows, God threatened judgment.

Listen to one passage from the Old Testament. This is Zechariah 7:8–14 (ESV):

<sup>8</sup> And the word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying, <sup>9</sup> “Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, <sup>10</sup> do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.” <sup>11</sup> But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. <sup>12</sup> They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts. <sup>13</sup> “As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,” says the LORD of hosts, <sup>14</sup> “and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate.”

God takes sin very seriously. Oppressing other people, who are also made in the image of God, is a serious crime against not only other people, but against their Creator. Notice that God also takes it very seriously when people “devise evil against another in [their] heart.” We may not all actively take advantage of the widow and the orphan, but we have all had evil thoughts against other people. We may not have the same pride of the scribes and the other religious leaders of Jesus’ day, but we do all have some pride. We tend to put ourselves first. So, we shouldn’t think that Jesus’ words could only apply to religious leaders.

Still, religious leaders do fall into particular temptations. Many do succumb to pride. This happens in our celebrity age. The celebrity Christian is someone who is in danger of great temptations. We have celebrity pastors and celebrity Christian musicians and celebrity Christian authors and even comedians. And many of them have fallen and will continue to fall. Some fall into sexual sin, into affairs and sexual abuse. They think that their position of authority somehow gives them license to take advantage of women or, even worse, children. Some fall because of arrogance and pride, refusing to take wise counsel, acting like bullies. Some fall because of money issues. There’s something about celebrity, about fame, that leads people to think they are greater than they are. It leads people to think that they are above the law. And with religious leaders, it can lead them to think they are above the law that they teach.

And there’s a history of religious leaders using their positions to get rich. This often happens by taking advantage of the poor and gullible. Today, preachers of the prosperity gospel

do this. The prosperity gospel is the message that says that if you're faithful to God, if you really believe in God's power and promises, you will receive God's favor, usually in the form of wealth or happiness or a good family or health or friends, or something along those lines. In other words, if you're a good Christian and you really trust in God, then he will make your life abundant in some obvious way right now. It's the message taught by Joel Osteen and Kenneth Copeland and Creflo Dollar and many others. It's sometimes called the "word of faith" theology. If you say something and really believe it, it will come to pass. That's why it's called "name it and claim it" or "blab it and grab it" theology.

I saw one example of this recently. Donald Trump appointed Paula White to be the head of his administration's Faith and Opportunity Initiative. The next day, Paula White sent an email to her ministry supporters, asking them to give \$3,600 to her to receive God's blessings.<sup>5</sup> She made a video in which she claims that God is ready to perform "a suddenly"—that's what she calls God's sudden activity of bringing blessings to his people.<sup>6</sup> She quotes a lot of Scripture quickly in a way that might fool people who don't understand what the Bible says in context. She says that people should give her \$3,600, or \$300, or \$70. This is supposedly based on numbers of animals given to God in 2 Chronicles 29:32–33. She writes to her email list: "GOD IS PREPARED TO SHIFT YOUR SEASON TO A SUDDENLY! This is time sensitive. I ask you to act NOW! And as you act I declare by Apostolic authority that over the next three months your SUDDENLY season will arrive. . . . The heavens will move as you move." Give to Paula and God will give to you—that's what she's saying.

This theology isn't just nonsense, it's evil. It takes advantage of the gullible, who think that if they make a sacrificial financial gift to these people, God will later reward them. I've heard prosperity gospel preachers say that people who can't afford to give should in faith put their donations on a credit card, trusting that God will bring finances into their life that they don't currently have so that they can later pay off their credit card balance. I'm sure some people have responded. After all, these prosperity gospel teachers are wealthy, which means some people must be supporting them. Getting rich by telling lies in the name of God is an evil thing.

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<sup>5</sup> Nicole A. Menzie, "Paula White Joins White House, Asks Ministry Supporters for \$3,600 in Return for God's Favor," *Medium*, November 1, 2019, <https://medium.com/@namenzie/paula-white-joins-white-house-asks-ministry-supporters-for-3-600-in-return-for-gods-favor-30242ade0c90>.

<sup>6</sup> You can see the video of Paula White here: [https://paulawhite.org/videos/Suddenly2015\\_Pgm2\\_Seg1\\_EmailVersion.mp4?inf\\_contact\\_key=cb4a9a3cf858c34aa45bc7971fc4f85ea61f15688044e0df333a256a7a7fd2ca](https://paulawhite.org/videos/Suddenly2015_Pgm2_Seg1_EmailVersion.mp4?inf_contact_key=cb4a9a3cf858c34aa45bc7971fc4f85ea61f15688044e0df333a256a7a7fd2ca).

The scribes are described as hypocrites, people who put on a public show of being holy in order to achieve fame and fortune. And Jesus says such people will be condemned by God—assuming that they don't humble themselves, confess their sins to God, and turn to him in faith. These scribes may fool other people, but there's no fooling God.

But Jesus doesn't just condemn religious hypocrisy. He also praises those who are sincerely religious. And we see this in the next few verses. Before we read them, I want to make a general comment about reading the Bible. The chapter and verse numbers that we have in our Bibles are not part of the original text of the Bible. Chapter numbers were created in the thirteenth century and verse numbers were created in the sixteenth century. They are very helpful in many ways. We can all find the same passage quickly even if we have different translations and editions of the Bible. But sometimes chapter numbers create divisions where there shouldn't be any. That's the case in this passage. I think we're supposed to read the end of chapter 20 and the beginning of chapter 21 together. With that being said, let's read Luke 21:1–4:

<sup>1</sup> Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, <sup>2</sup> and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. <sup>3</sup> And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. <sup>4</sup> For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

In the temple complex in Jerusalem, there were thirteen receptacles into which people could make offerings that were used to support worship at the temple. Jesus looks at the rich making their offerings. In Mark 12:41, we're told, "And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums." Perhaps the number and weight of the coins they put into these receptacles made a loud sound, publicly announcing how very generous they were.

But there's also a poor widow who makes an offering. She puts into two copper coins, two leptons, which in today's currency might be equivalent to two dollars, perhaps even less. Jesus says that this widow has actually given more than the rich, because "they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

Rich people sometimes are quite generous with their money. It's not uncommon to hear of millionaires giving large gifts to some charity or non-profit institution. But a millionaire can easily afford to give tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of dollars. Billionaires can easily give millions of dollars. But for someone who is barely surviving to give their last two dollars is a greater sacrifice. In giving whatever money she had, this widow had to trust that God

would provide for her. She would have to pray to God what Jesus told his disciples to pray: “Give us each day our daily bread” (Luke 11:3). She would have to hope that other people, whether family members or neighbors, would have to give her more money or food, so that she could continue to live.

She wasn’t giving this money because she was manipulated by a religious authority. She wasn’t giving this money so that she could meet the needs of some law. She wasn’t giving sacrificially to achieve her “best life now,” in response to some prosperity gospel teacher. She gave because she loved God, because she thought that worship of God at the temple was more important than anything else. She realized that everything she had was from God, and she wanted to give back to God what he had given to her. And Jesus commends her.

Last week, I talked about the importance of living life with an eternal perspective. If we think this life is what matters most, we will tend to be greedy and selfish. We will want to experience all of the world’s pleasures right now. But if we realize that this life is brief, and that the greatest pleasures will be found by spending eternity with God, we can give generously. We can also obey knowing that God isn’t withholding anything good from us. Likewise, we can give generously now, knowing we’ll be rich in eternity.

Jesus said, earlier in Luke, “Blessed are who you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). Jesus doesn’t mean that every poor person is automatically part of God’s kingdom. That would go against much of what he taught elsewhere. To be part of God’s kingdom, one must be born again of the Holy Spirit, transformed by God to be a new kind of person (John 3:3–8). One must believe in Jesus, the Son of God, as the world’s only Savior (John 6:27–29). But poor Christians can be comforted by knowing that in eternity, they will be rich. That doesn’t mean that in the new creation, every Christian will have a mansion and a sports car, or whatever your “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” or “MTV Cribs” fantasy is. But in eternity, there will be no suffering for Christians, and all who have put their faith in Jesus will have equal access to the one true God, the greatest treasure there is.

What we do we learn from this? First, we should learn from the negative example of the hypocritical scribes. We shouldn’t put on an air of religiosity, appearing holy in order to make a public impression. We should never use religion to manipulate God, because God can’t be manipulated. He knows our motivations—he knows them better than we do! If we don’t truly trust and love God, we shouldn’t obey him in order to get what we really want, which is money



or health or a nice life. If you do trust and love Jesus, don't make a show of what you do. Don't do things, whether giving or praying or anything else, in order to be seen.

Second, we should learn positively from the example of this widow. She gave generously in faith. I'm sure that all of us could give more to the church, more to missionaries, more to organizations that translate the Bible. We could all give more to the poor, to charities that help orphans and widows and the homeless. When it comes to giving, we should do so according to our ability to give. The apostle Paul gave instructions to church in Corinth for their giving. In 1 Corinthians, he said, "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come." (1 Cor. 16:2). In other words, give according to how God has prospered you. But giving super-abundantly and sacrificially is commended. In 2 Corinthians, he commended the church in Macedonia, because "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, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord" (2 Cor. 8:2-3).

Paul goes on to say that our giving shouldn't be done "reluctantly or under compulsion" (2 Cor. 9:7). Our giving should be done from a heart that has been changed by God, a heart that is thankful, a heart that recognizes how much God has done for us in Jesus.

And we see a hint of that in this passage. We're told that this widow "out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." Literally, the original Greek says that she gave *πάντα τὸν βίον*, which could mean "her whole life." "Bio" can mean one's living, meaning one's possessions, but it refers to life more generally. Biology is the study of life. Biography is something written about a life. This woman gave more than the rich because she gave her whole life to God. And what does that have to do with Jesus? Jesus gave his whole life to bring us back to God.

That's the story of Christianity. God made us to know him, love him, trust him, worship him, serve him, and obey him. But from the beginning, humans haven't done that. We've rejected God. We don't treasure him. We don't trust that his words are good for us. So, we shut him up and go our own way. While we don't always do great evils in the world's eyes, to ignore the One we are made for is a great evil. We were made to spend our lives for the worthiest cause, which is to know God, to love him, and to live for him. But we don't do that. We sin. And God cannot dwell with sin. He can't have sin tearing apart his creation. He is patient now, but one day he will condemn sinners and cast them out of his creation forever.

But God is merciful and gracious, and he sent his Son to become a man. Jesus left his home in heaven, a home full of glorious riches, to live on Earth. That didn't mean that he stopped being God. It meant that as a human, he had to deal with the things we all experience: hunger, thirst, fatigue, and pain. But he endured more: he was rejected and betrayed, laughed at and mocked, tortured, and even killed. He was the only person who ever lived a sinless, perfect life, yet he was executed like a criminal. This was the greatest act of evil. But it was also God's plan to punish sin without destroying all sinners. Jesus took the penalty that we deserve, which is death and hell. And he rose from the grave, showing that he paid that penalty in full, and that he has power over sin and death. All who come to him in faith are forgiven of even the worst of their crimes, the greatest of their sins. They will live with Jesus forever in a perfect world. But those who come to faith will be changed. They will live differently.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about giving, he urged them to give generously. The reason why they should give was the example of Jesus. Paul writes this:

<sup>8</sup> I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. <sup>9</sup> 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 (2 Cor. 8:8–9).

I think Paul would want us to do more than give financially. After all, Jesus didn't literally give money. By becoming a man and dying for sinners, Jesus became poor. He gave his life for us. What should we give him in return? Our whole lives. That means we will give money generously, but we should also give our time, our minds, our hearts, and our obedience to Jesus.

What would it look like for you to give a bit more to Jesus? Some of us might need to give our lives to him. We haven't put our faith in him. We still think that we're the king of our worlds, so we refuse to acknowledge that Jesus is the true King. We fail to see how we've rejected God, so we don't see sin as a big deal. If that's you, I urge you to turn to Jesus now.

Some of us might need to make a greater commitment to Jesus. We might need to read our Bibles more and pray more. We might need to commit to a church, becoming members—committing to the church is committing to the body of Christ. There's no such thing as Lone Ranger Christians who do the Christian life on their terms, apart from the authority of the church. Real Christians recognize the church as God's plan for his people. Some of us might need to give more—not just money, but also time and effort. What would it look like for you to give more of

your life to Jesus? Jesus paid it all. All to him we owe. Get in the arena and spend your life in the worthiest cause.