

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Our texts today are about grace and faith and the response of faith. I'm going to consider these in the opposite order, as we look at several pictures of religious people before our eyes.

First, Jesus speaks of the scribes, part of the religious establishment. They were important Jews. Some served on the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin. They knew the Scriptures—that is, the law of Moses—well, and taught in the synagogues. They surely knew what was good, and what the Lord required of all believers — but doubly so for them as teachers of the law. The Prophet Micah wrote: this is what the Lord requires of you, *“to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”* Yet, Jesus criticizes them, not just for failing every now and then, but for doing just the opposite: not humility, but self-exaltation, wanting the best seats and the honored places and flattering words; not justice or kindness, but dishonesty and cruelty and greed, devouring widow's houses. Jesus has harsh words of condemnation for them.

As Christians, we are also called away from *“greed and self-indulgence,”* from all pretense, from a religiosity that focuses only on rites and ceremonies and neglects *“the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”* That is, we are also called to the justice and kindness and humility that the prophet spoke about, and Jesus' condemnations apply to us if we neglect them.

Second, after this Jesus sat down in front of the temple treasury and watched religious lay people put in their contributions. Some people put in large sums, and you'll notice that Jesus spoke no word of condemnation for them or for their contributions. But neither did He heap praise upon them for their offering. They may have even given their tithe—10% of their income as stated in the law.

But this is not praiseworthy; it's duty. And Jesus teaches, *“Does [the master] thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”* Consider the military today: doing your duty is the expectation. You get no special accolades for doing your duty. It's going above and beyond what is required that receives the recognition and praise. Similarly, no one would expect to be praised for obeying the traffic laws. The police will give you no award for stopping at a red light or driving the correct direction down a one-way street.

Therefore, with regard to the rich, Jesus taught His disciples that their contribution was no real sacrifice for them. They gave out of their abundance. They had no worries that they might not be able to eat. They had no worries that they might be thrown out of their home—with no shelter from the elements on a

cold night. They kept the law, but keeping the law is not worthy of praise. It's simply an obligation.

But a person might give in another way, with another motivation, the motivation of faith and trust. God wants us to consider the abundance of all that He has given us, and then give generously and cheerfully out of a grateful heart—not compelled by the law, *“not as an exaction”* St. Paul would say, but trusting Him who says *“don't be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.”* He wants you to trust that He, who is *“able to make all grace abound to you,”* will do it, *“so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”*

That's the kind of giving the widow of Zarephath demonstrates, though religious, not a believer until her encounter with Elijah. She was ready to bake the last little portion of her flour and oil into bread for her son and herself and then die. But then Elijah the prophet came to her and asked for some bread. That is, he asked her to trust his Lord, the God of Israel, that He would take care of her, that He would not let her flour bin be emptied or her oil run dry. So, *“she went and did as Elijah [had] said,”* and the word of the Lord that he spoke to her—fantastic as it seems—came to pass.

Similarly the widow in the Gospel lesson was poor. She had only two copper coins to her name. Nevertheless, she put them into the offering box. What trust she must have had—what faith! And though her two mites, as they used to be called, were worth much less than any other giver's offering, yet Jesus commended her for putting in more than all the rest combined who had contributed that day.

You might note that we do not hear any more about this woman in the Scriptures. Nevertheless, I'm confident that Jesus, the compassionate one, who witnessed the whole thing and commended this widow, did not disappoint her, but took care of her, even as He did the widow of Zarephath, even as He will you as you give cheerfully, generously, and sacrificially to the Lord, as you seek to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

But, you know, I think Jesus calls our attention to this widow for more than an object lesson on giving and more than an example of faith. I think Jesus wants us to see in this widow a picture of Himself — of God's grace toward us in the Son. For even as this widow was beset with poverty, so Jesus, though rich as the Son of God, *“yet for your sake ... became poor.”* Jesus made Himself worthless in the eyes of man when He descended from the Father's side to become a bondservant here on earth, God *“being born in the likeness of men.”* And with these words: *“Yes, Father, yes, most willingly I'll bear what You command Me,”* figuratively, a copper coin fell into the offering box, and the Son became incarnate of the Virgin Mary.

But He had another coin; He was not done. He humbled Himself further, *“becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* More weakness and humility and shame. He suffered many things—was treated with mockery and contempt. Tongues wagged; hands were raised against Him—to wound Him, to kill Him. We complain, *“It’s so unfair.”* But no! It’s justice. *“The deepest stroke that pierced Him was the stroke that justice gave.”* And it’s love. *“O wondrous Love, what have You done! The Father offers up His Son desiring our salvation.”* And not under the compulsion of the law but with these words, *“All this I gladly suffer,”* the second copper coin dropped into the offering box, for the Son entered into the Most Holy Place, heaven itself, as our high priest, carrying His own blood, a lamb without blemish slaughtered for our sins, trusting that the Father was pleased with His offering, trusting that He was safe in His Father’s bosom as He waited for His exaltation on the third day.

I admit. It’s a bit allegorical, but this is the picture I see in the widow and her offering. Humble incarnation and sacrificial death are the two copper coins the Son of God offered up to the Father — out of His poverty, He offered everything He had. And the Father delighted in His beloved Son, and highly exalted Him, and now gives us the fruit of this self-offering, by water and word and blood, so that, we, by His poverty, might become rich.

It’s mindful of this, our richness through Christ’s poverty, that I am calling you to justice doing, kindness loving, and humble walking before the Lord—an expression of your faith in Christ, founded on the grace of His incarnation and cross. God grant that your faith might find expression also in giving generously toward the work of His kingdom, that when your last hour comes, He may grant you a blessed end, and finally on the last day, that you might hear Jesus’ own voice commend you: Come you blessed of my Father.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.