

Introductory

The first part of this pericope is about Jesus warning people about the Scribes. Mark, whose audience is Rome, writes three verses (38-40) of condemnation, and Luke, who is writing to a Greek crowd, also writes three verses (20:45-47). Matthew, writing to Jewish people (probably in Damascus) has a whole chapter (23) of condemnation.

In our preaching and teaching, we likewise should spend less time talking about the distant sins of other people and more time talking about sins that are closer to home. A lot of preaching these days is condemnatory in nature, mostly to people who freely acknowledge their sin, and why harangue people who are in church about coming to church?

The second part of the pericope, which follows naturally out of the first, is the account of an incident that has come to be known as The Widow's Mite. Matthew omits it from his Gospel, but Luke (21:1-4) records it and places it in the same place as Mark, after the condemnation of the Scribes and before the Olivet Discourse.

None of these texts is appointed to be read in the TLH one-year lectionary. Too bad. This Mark text in its entirety is appointed for Pentecost 24B in LW, and the others are not. LSB has Matthew 23:1-12, the first part of that entire chapter of condemnation, as the appointed reading for Proper 26A, but does not call for the Luke text to be read.

Good stories often have compelling characters, and this true story has one player who is a widow, several designated as "Scribes," and some "rich people," who may well be the same people as the Scribes. Unless all of your hearers have a deep understanding of life for a widow in 1st century Palestine, you should probably explain it to them.

A woman was always under the authority of, and taken care of financially by a man, first by her father, and then by her husband. If her husband died, then if there was an inheritance it went to a male or males, and she was at their mercy. If she had no sons, or bad sons, or if the inheritance was meager, she would have had little choice but to live hand to mouth.

As the Greatest Generation leaves, and my generation ages, forgotten is the time when women were nurses and secretaries and men did most everything else, a time when women were, for better or for worse, more dependent on a man than they are now, a time before pensions and life insurance. Then widowhood and financial hardship went hand in glove.

I can still hear the sound of pity in my mother's voice whenever she talked about a widow, like her mother, who was left poor with a lot of mouths to feed when her husband died. She epitomized the uneducated women of her generation; she worked cleaning houses for rich people, in a kitchen at a school, and I think we probably helped her out.

Not so much these days. If I die tomorrow, my wife the Chemist will not be destitute. She would miss me, but she would not miss my money. My talented college educated daughters are now married, but they need a man to support them financially like a fish needs a bicycle to give it money. In that regard, my women-folk are a lot like a lot of women-folk.

Many wives are better off financially in widowhood because somebody – I'm never clear exactly whether it's the dead person or the one alive – were "protected," as the Thrivent guy puts it. Without getting into the whole women movement thing, we need to explain a social situation then that is increasingly different from our own now.

But when it comes to rich, powerful lawyers, some things never change. I know some rich, powerful lawyers whom I really like, and when it comes right down to it, most lawyers are scrupulously honest people. And then there's Saul Goldman. I'm sure that there were likeable lawyers at the time of Jesus, but those aren't the ones who appear in this true story.

These men were experts in OT Law, and most translations call them "Scribes," and for over four hundred years the English and now American speaking world has known them by that moniker, and we sort of know what it means, don't we? Well, maybe it wouldn't hurt to explain it again. Maybe read the article in Jewish Encyclopedia first.

We will want to note for our hearers that the "Triumphal Entry" has taken place, and that Jesus has now entered into the Jerusalem for the final time. For one or more overnights, He will retire to Bethany, now a Jerusalem suburb, but He knows what the week will bring. After He enters the city, He immediately finds Himself confronting the religious leaders.

Mark has Him cursing the fig tree, cleansing the Temple, then challenged by "the chief priests, and the Scribes and the Elders" on His way to Temple. Next, He tells the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, and they knew that He was talking about them. They sent others to ask "testing" questions of Jesus, queries intended to make Him misspeak.

They want Him to say something regrettable about paying taxes, about marriage in heaven, and about the ordering of the Commandments. As usual, Jesus turns the tables on His wouldbe embarrassers, and "after that no one dared to ask him any questions" (12:34). He is in the Temple teaching from the Psalm 110, and we pick it up there.

Textual Notes

The Scribe

38. It is while He is teaching about Psalm 110, which Mark quotes, and Mark does not quote that much from the OT. In teaching mode, Jesus is rhetorically asking what the Psalmist – who is David – means when he says what he says. Upon hearing what Jesus says about that Psalm, “the great throng heard Him gladly,” and then He shifts gears.

He is located in the Temple (35), a place of considerable activity, where Scribes would have been moving hither and yon, likely also teaching other people. You wonder if the Scribes were saying something within earshot that caused Jesus to jump on them, or maybe this was the part in the class where He talks about Stewardship.

Jewish Encyclopedia begins the article on Scribes,

Body of teachers whose office was to interpret the Law to the people, their organization beginning with Ezra, who was their chief, and terminating with Simeon the Just.

They go on to note the scribe as teacher began when prophecies ceased in Israel; the fixing of the OT canon. Their job was to copy the OT manuscripts. The one who was doing that ought to have a thorough knowledge of the teachings contained in those manuscripts, and by copying them, that knowledge of those teachings increased.

The original meaning of the Hebrew word "soferim" was "people who know how to write"; and therefore, the royal officials who were occupied in recording in the archives the proceedings of each day were called scribes

These days, the soferim are very important people. I’m not sure about every single synagogue in the world, but every synagogue has one or more copies of the OT, kept in an expensive cabinet. You can’t just go down to the Jewish bookstore and buy a copy. It has to be written by a sopher, the modern-day scribe.

Whatever prompted it, “Καὶ ἐν τῇ διδασκίᾳ αὐτοῦ ἔλεγεν - and in His teaching, He is saying” things about the Scribes. I know that people will often say that they don’t like it when the pastor talks about the teachings of other religions or church bodies, but others will ask those very kinds of questions because they want to know what’s up with them.

This is one of many times when Jesus talks about His own religion and the perversion of it by people like the Scribes. He very seldom talks about pagan religion, but by then the OT prophets thoroughly covered that. Later, Paul will spend a lot of time talking about perversions of Christianity; “hucksters” or “false apostles” or “Judaizers,” to name a few.

The verb ἔλεγεν is in the imperfect tense, focus on the connection between the actor and the act, and here it means that He “began to say” or that He “repeatedly said” those things, or both. Clearly, He *began* to say, and we can certainly envision Jesus *repeating* Himself, like we will repeat ourselves during preaching and teaching, to emphasize certain things.

He was saying “Βλέπετε ἀπὸ τῶν γραμματέων τῶν θελόντων ἐν στολαῖς περιπατεῖν καὶ ἀσπασμοὺς ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς – See, away from the Scribes, desiring in robes to walk about, and greeting in the marketplace.” Most of the translations have Jesus saying “Beware,” and this word is the first entry under “Beware” in Vine.

The verb is βλέπω, and the form is a present imperative, and “βλέπετε (ἀπὸ) τῶν γραμματέων” means “see (away from) the Scribes.” The word has to do with the physical sense of sight and perception, but it also is often used to indicate more than that; to see, to take note, and to be warned; what you see them doing, don’t do that.

I used “away” in my translation because this particular preposition (ἀπὸ) with a genitive object indicates motion “away from.” When I said that the Scribes were likely teaching the people, that’s sort of what they do. Whether they were in close proximity to Him here or not, He is telling His hearers to get clear away from those people.

Don’t be like those Scribes, who “like to walk around in robes.” If I told you that clothing was a very clear and public indication of wealth and station in the time of Jesus, would you understand that concept? Talk to your people about how certain types and brands and designers these days that are worn and maybe flaunted by the wealthy today.

I will check with my daughter the fashion maven before I preach this text to get more specific information about the specifics. Turns out that Vera Wang is nothing special; you can buy it at Target. Fashion is not exactly my thing. I have two outfits; my black and white work clothes, and shorts or jeans and a cotton shirt, collared optional.

They also like “greetings in public places.” Have I ever mentioned my encounter with Pro Bowler and Super Bowl Champion Greg Jennings? Have I mentioned that – back in the day – if you were at Lambeau, before the game started, you could always tell where Brett Favre was at any given time because every head in the stadium was turned towards him?

And that the highlight of my daughter’s semester in London was when she got her picture snapped near J Lo. On some level, it must feel good to be out in public and everybody wants to be your friend, sort of like District Presidents must feel like at Pastors Conferences and District Conventions. Everybody wanted to be these people friend.

39. That's not all they want. They particularly seem to like things that begin with "πρωτο," things like; "πρωτοκαθεδρίας ἐν τγαῖς συναγωγαῖς – the first seat in the synagogue and the first couch – καὶ πρωτοκλισίας ἐν τοῖς δείπνοις – at the banquet." These are the places of honor in the realm of the religious and in the realm of the social.

The idea of class and places of honor continued after the time of Jesus. If you go to evensong at St. Patrick in Dublin, you may get to sit in Jonathan Swift's pew. It's the one in front, pulpit side, a place of honor for an honorable man. We got there just behind some American tourists, so had to sit in a pew that had been owned by a lesser Christian.

In America, the early years, it was customary for people to actually buy their actual pew, a practice that I think has died out, although we all know that in every church a certain pew belongs to a certain person or family, and some pews maybe display a brass plate that says that their family has bought it.

For better or for worse, we have somewhat successfully eliminated the idea of class from our society; putting that into the U.S. Constitution was a good start. For a good American example of "first" places at banquet, we need look no further than the wedding or any other formal affair, places where seating is both important and noted.

Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges says,

The seats of honour for the elders of the synagogue were placed in front of the ark containing the Law, in the uppermost part, where they sat with their faces to the people. In the synagogue at Alexandria there were seventy-one golden chairs, according to the number of the members of the Great Sanhedrim (biblehub.com).

40. But there is yet a seamier side to the likes of the Scribes, who "κατεσθίωντες τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν – are devouring the home of widows." The verb κατεσθίω means to consume something completely, to clean up your plate, and it is a present participle, indicating that "devouring" is not a one-time act, but customary, a normal way of doing business.

The term is clearly used here metaphorically, and the metaphorical meaning is clear. As always, I do not think it good to remove figures of speech used by Jesus, but to keep them, maybe explain them, and maybe even add to them or put it in terms that allow the hearer to see the meaning. Everybody knows what it means to clean up your plate.

Exactly how does it play out that these rich, powerful religious men metaphorically devour widows' houses? Some of the commentators seem to think that there is some kind of religious ruse going on here, that these women think they are giving their house to the Temple, but the Scribes end up with them instead.

Barclay calls the devouring accusation “a savage charge,” and is so bold to say (he is writing in 50’s England) that “it is a sad fact that women have always been imposed upon by religious charlatans...” If we look at the modern TV preacher, many of them would be open to the same “savage charge” that Jesus here levels at these men.

Barclay talks about how Scribes were not allowed to take pay for their work, that he was supposed to have a trade to support himself, and that certain ones had “managed to convey to people that there was no higher duty and privilege than to support a rabbi in comfort,” which would “undoubtedly entitle him or her who gave it to a high place in” heaven.

Jewish Encyclopedia says that scribes were paid for at least some of their work, mostly legal documents; things like lending documents and marriage licenses. Whether or not these particular scribes were paid or not, Barclay’s words sound the ring of truth. I have known of people like this, and I have known people like this, not all of them TV preachers.

As to the nuts and bolts of how this devouring took place, we can only imagine. Learned man who are writing legal documents and who are unsavory always seem to be able to figure out how to put their skills to work to separate people from their money, or in this case to clean a widow’s plate for her, and then charge her fees for that service.

Neither does Josephus think highly of these men. While he generally thinks of the Scribes and their dealings with widows in much the same way as Jesus thinks of the Scribes and their dealings with widows, gives us no real specifics of how this would have taken place, at least not that I could find. He does say,

This sect, pretended to a more exact knowledge of the law, on which account the women were subject to them, as pretending to be dear to God. And when Alexandra obtained the government, (Jewish War, b. I. ch. 4), they insinuated themselves into her favor, as being the exactest sect of the Jews, and the most exact interpreters of the law, and, abusing her simplicity, did as they listed, remove and dispose, bind and loose, and even cut off men. (Ant. 1. xvii. chap. 3, from biblehub.com, quoting from Clarke’s Commentary, who is quoting Josephus.)

But before they devour, they pray about it. They pray about it a lot, “προφάσει μακρὰ προσευχόμενοι – as an excuse, praying long prayers.” Each of the synoptic writers use the noun “πρόφασις,” most often translated “pretense” or “excuse” to describe the state of mind of these rich and powerful men as they do what they do. And they did it a lot.

Besides those three occurrences, the word appears four more times in the NT (Jn15:22, Ac. 27:30, Php. 1:18, 1 Th. 2:5). The word has to do with one’s motive, and it speaks to the difference between what a person is *saying* or doing and what the person is *thinking*. Likely, they were praying in such a manner as to explain to God why they were devouring.

The preacher or teacher might want to invite the listeners to wonder exactly what form a prayer like that would take, by saying something like, “I wonder what that prayer would have sounded like” and then pause, but not for very long or they will think that you have lost your place on the manuscript, and that’s awkward.

This whole business of powerful and religious men acting like this reminds me of a Dickens novel. *Oliver Twist* comes to mind, as well as nearly every other single page that the man ever wrote. But like a Greek tragedy, a life lived in such abundance will end with want; “οὔτοι λήμψονται περισσότερον κρίμα – “they will receive greater (harsher) judgment.”

The root of the comparative adjective περισσότερον is “περισσός,” a word that means greater or lesser degree. Hell will not be pleasant for anybody, but it will be more unpleasant for these men. Their abuse of the abundance of gifts of God stand in stark contrast to the use the woman makes of her meager coins, as does the eternal end of both.

The Widow

One of the reasons – and there are many – why I avoid preaching on the OT – and by that I mean that I almost never do on Sunday – is that you often have to take so much time explaining things that happened long ago and in a faraway place, to twenty-first century Americans that you don’t have much time left to talk about Jesus.

Even if we are preaching on the Gospel text, which I do every Sunday, we have to explain some OT things, but not too thoroughly, and this I do happily. When we preach this text, we should explain what it means when it says that Jesus was “καθίσας κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου – sitting down opposite the treasury.”

We descend now into the basement, over to the stacks, where we retrieve the hard copy of Edersheim’s *The Temple and Its Ministry and Services*, now available on the Internet. There are also web sites that talk about the arrangement of Temple, and most of them quote or appear to draw heavily from Edersheim.

The Temple Treasury spoken of here was a row of thirteen “trumpets,” so named because they were narrower at the top and wider at the bottom, specific vessels into which one would put his specific offering, located on one wall in the Women’s Court. The meaning here seems to be that Jesus was in that particular court, somewhere near those trumpets.

We see that Jesus is close enough to see who is putting what into the offering receptacles. He observed “πῶς ὁ ὄχλος βάλλει χαλκὸν εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον – how the crowd cast coin into the treasury.” The exact meaning of “πῶς – how” will soon become clear, and χαλκὸν is a word that appears only five times in the NT.

Sometimes that word means metal; copper, brass, and bronze, and in other places, like here, the more specific meaning of the word is to refer to a metal coin. We note that the line between “coin” and “metal” would not have been hard and fast. Metal had value in and of itself, so was currency, and sometimes that currency took the form of a coin, but not always.

The woman is described with a noun and an adjective; “a widow” and “poor – πτωχός.” You might recognize πτωχός from last Sunday, All Saints, where we made the distinction between what we would call “working poor” and “dirt poor,” and we noted there that πτωχός means what we would call dirt poor. People understand those terms.

On one level, given the financials on most widows of that time and place, to call a widow “poor” is almost redundant. It’s not that it was impossible for a widow to not be poor – we have just found out that some of them had homes and maybe even owned them – it’s just that it was highly unlikely, and we will soon see just how poor she is.

Jesus watches her come and put “λεπτὰ δύο – two lepta” into one of the trumpets. A λεπτὰ is a small thin coin, “probably the smallest piece of money” (biblos.com). Footnoting bible.org, WIK agrees, and says that it was “worth about six minutes of an average daily wage.” The root means “scale,” like on a fish, or “peeled, fine, thin, small, light.”

Standing in apposition to the two lepta, like a twenty dollar bill might stand in apposition to two tens, is one “κοδράντης” which is “a quadrans, the smallest Roman copper coin” (biblos.com). The translations like the words “copper” and “cent” and “penny” to describe the amount, but the KJV’s “mite” has become firmly ensconced in the vernacular.

In KJV times, the mite was an “embarrassingly small” amount, and it would have been the offering of only the poorest of the poor. I who am not slow to criticize translators am happy to report that almost none of the modern translations, with the exception of those derived from the KJV, use the word “mites,” and I have mixed feelings about that.

For us to talk about a woman putting two pennies into the offering plate on Sunday – because that’s all she had – would be to capture the essence of what was going on here. I will probably do just that when I preach this text and will maybe even ask what they would think if the plate is going around and they would see somebody put two pennies into it.

This hypothetical – to my knowledge that sort of thing never happens – will create pathos, make them feel, and also engage their minds, whether they like it or not, because they will think about what they would think. And now, what would you think if the woman cut a penny in half and put that into the plate?

Poverty is a relative term, and we have a hard time getting our heads around such poverty as this. Some Americans have even questioned if real poverty exists in our country, since when compared to the rest of the world even the poorest of our poor have more than most people in most third-world countries.

A point of comparison here is in degrees of poverty, but the main point is in what one does with one's possessions. This incident doesn't so much elevate the poor and castigate the wealthy as it speaks to percentage giving. The woman is voluntarily doing what Jesus told that guy to do a couple of weeks ago – giving her all – and the other people are not.

43. He had been teaching, then He had taken a break to people watch, and now He continues to teach, using the woman – He does not bring her from home – as an object lesson. He calls to Himself those who are learning from Him, and He uses this teachable moment to instruct them about the true meaning of large offerings and small offerings.

He says, “Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἡ χήρα αὕτη ἢ πτωχὴ πλεῖον πάντων ἔβαλεν τῶν βαλλόντων εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον – Truly I say to you that this poor widow has cast *more* than all of those into the treasury.” The lesson here is clear, and He in case you missed it, He is about to explain it (44). Not only has her offering equaled theirs, but it has exceeded them!

Keeping with the scenario of the woman putting pennies or less into the plate, now imagine that the pastor observes her offering, and then he notes all the other offerings, even the giving of the heavy hitters, and he then says to all of you what Jesus said to all of them, and especially the comparative “more.” If you heard that, what would you think?

Even if they have heard this story a hundred times – and even if they understand and even if they agree with what Jesus says – they aren't going to really like hearing anybody say anything like that to them. It's not the way the Natural Man looks at things, and the Old Sinful Flesh wants to think like that, but we have this true story teaching us what it does.

44. We now find out very specifically the logical rationale of Jesus calling the widow's offering of a penny or less more than the offerings of the wealthy people; “πάντες γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς ἔβαλον – all of them out of their surplus cast (their offering),” i.e., it's not money they need to live, i.e. none of them are going to starve or even want.

Compare and contrast the widow, “ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν ἔβαλεν, ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς.– out of her poverty, as much as she had, she cast all” into the pot. She didn't have much, but what she did have, she gave. We see these days that the poor are more apt than the rich to give to poor people in time of need, and this woman is all in.

She cast into the pot for priests and poor “τὸν βίον αὐτῆς – even her life.” The word here rendered “poverty – ὑστερήσεως” is rooted in the concept of lacking or falling short. The word “life – βίον” points to her physical life; we might say that she had dedicated her very life to God, and that wouldn't be the first time or the last time that has happened.

Law/Gospel

Rich-Poor/Poor-Rich – although not as explicit, at least about going to heaven, as The Rich Man and Lazarus, this account is an account of contrasts. The Scribe is rich, powerful, ruthless and respected in this life, but things will not be good for him in the next. The widows whose houses they devour are generally none of those things, and the one widow who gives her penny is among the poorest of the poor, but we get the idea that this one who has given her all, her life to God will be richly rewarded.

Poverty/Abundance – A sermon like this would focus on the widow and widows and their lot in this life and the next. Poverty in this life is a result of sin, and the atonement of Jesus takes away our sin, and our poverty turns to the riches of heaven in the next life. There was no poverty in Paradise, and there will be no poverty in Paradise.

Sermon Titles

When Less is More

The Biggest Giver

What's a Mite?

The Widow's Mite

Hymns

Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us – LSB 851

One Thing's Needful – LSB 536

Anything from the *Stewardship* section

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, IA

Resources

ACC – Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Mark).
Intervarsity Press, 2002

BAG – Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

BCLY – William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark..* The Westminster Press, 1975

FGG – James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*. Concordia Publishing House, 1993

MGM – W.F. Moulton, A.S. Geden, H.K. Moulton, *A Concordance to the Greek Testament*. T & T Clark LTD., 1978

MM – James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982

ODCC – F.L. Cross, Editor, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford University Press, 1978

RNK – Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1976

RSV – Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Zondervan Publishing House, 1965

UBD – Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, 1977.

WP – A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Baker, 1930

VINE – W.E.Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984

WIK – www.wikipedia.com

BIB – www.biblos.com

GBO – www.greekbible.com

Digital Classics Library - www.perseus.tufts.edu

Internet Classics Library – www.classics.mit.edu

Christian Classics Ethereal Library - www.ccel.org

Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html