

Sermon: **A Noisy Show and a Quiet Offering**

Text: Mark 12:38-44

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Those scribes. Don't we just love to hate them.

Well not any or all of them, but the ones that Jesus singles out and warns us about. Look at them! You can't miss them. Everybody sees them. They are high-profile people, recognized as public figures.

And look how they push and play it. Jesus says they like to walk around in their long white linen robes, fringed with tassels that touch the ground. These long robes typified wealth and leisure, distinguishing them from them from people of common labor. They strutted in their fine regalia as a sign of their religious credentials and their exalted status. They liked the recognition and the greetings of respect. They loved it when people rose as they passed by. They liked the important, visible seats in the synagogue and the prominent, influential places of honor at banquets. They said long prayers, not so much to be heard by God, but for the sake of appearance before other people.

They loved the regalia and the ritual and the recognition. Yet it's all such blatant pretense, for all the while, they devour widows' houses. They show off their religious status to mask their egotism and greed. They use their position for personal aggrandizement, all the while, exploiting the vulnerable.

There is something terribly insidious about this one sentence... "They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance they say long prayers." There's something incongruous here. It's flat out religious hypocrisy. And we all know that religious hypocrisy is something we will not tolerate. We hate it. And we love to hate it when we see it in other people.

So don't we love to hate these scribes. Jesus said they will receive the greater condemnation, but we still love to hate them in the meantime.

Then, in stark contrast we have this poor widow. Don't we just love to love her.

In her day widows were empty of any social advantage or claim. She was poor and vulnerable. She was at the bottom of the social food chain. Apart from mercy, she was likely to be "devoured."

But she was a true worshiper of God. She comes to the temple and there, in the midst of the crowd and amid the many wealthy people putting large sums into the temple treasury, she quietly slips in her offering... two small coins... worth a penny. Completely unnoticed, she comes without any pretense, with nothing to gain for herself.

She comes only to worship God and to make an offering to God. She knows her place and position in the economy of God. She knows her acceptance in the presence of God. And in the presence of God, she receives her portion with gladness and thanksgiving. And in the economy of God, she is the possessor of all things.

We didn't see her. But Jesus did. We would not know of her except that Jesus pointed her out to us. Jesus distinguished her and set her apart from all the rest.

What a wonderful distinction. It's a quiet but holy distinction. That's exactly what holiness is... being set apart unto God. She was both poor and generous. Did you know that poverty and generosity are not mutually exclusive? In fact it's more common than we can know. That's because it's usually quiet. Nothing here about "donor recognition".

When Jesus said that she had contributed more than all the rest, he clearly was not thinking of monetary value. This issue of worth here was so much more than any amount of money. What was worthy was the offering of herself to God. She put in "everything she had... all she had to live on". This was her life. (*Bios* in the original language) It was her way of life, her means of life, her lifestyle, her very life and the whole of it.

That's the meaning of her offering. That's the essence of all offering to God. That's the value of our gift, even as Christ gave his life for us.

It was a quiet offering in contrast to the noisy show of the scribes.

Theirs were a pretentious presentation of themselves before others.  
Hers was a genuine contribution of herself to God.

Theirs were certainly noteworthy.  
Hers was worthwhile, and worthy of God.

The contrast in our lesson is not a simple contrast between scribes and widows; or between rich and poor; powerful and vulnerable; influential and unknown. But is it a more specific contrast in heart attitude and motivation. Hers was an offering offered to God.

The point of our lesson is to show us her offering and to help us understand what holy distinction is the offering of *our* very lives to God... who we are... as we are... offered wholly to God. Jesus shows us the difference between pretentious presentation, and genuine offering. He shows it in such bold relief. We can't miss it. It's glaring.

So we love to hate these scribes. We like to criticize them and feel contempt and disgust for them, but we do not easily see ourselves alongside them.

And we love to love this poor widow. We like to put her on a pedestal and to venerate her, but we do not easily see ourselves alongside her.

Those scribes! So out of control! We're more moderate in our pride; much more subtle in our pretense. We're quite cool and smooth about it.

That widow! So extreme! We're more moderate in our contributions; not quite so passionate and over-board with our offerings.

Those scribes are at the top of things and we love to look down on them. This poor widow is at the bottom and we love to look up to her. But do we see ourselves in all this? Can we find ourselves in our subtle versions of one or the other?

This woman... poor... widow... whatever, was a woman of true distinction as Jesus himself so distinguished her. It was a Godly distinction; the distinction that is intrinsic to the biblical concept of holiness... a life distinctly given over to God in offering... set apart to God in life and lifestyle. It's a rare distinction that I wish were not so rare.

She lived a life of holy distinction and therefore was not always having to make distinctions. She was who she was, as she was, given wholly to God.

May her kind of distinction not be rare among us.

Amen.