

Title: Critical Issue #2
Text: Luke 20.45-47
Theme: Beware of hypocrisy
Series: Luke
Aim: I aim to warn my people of how easy a pretense of spirituality is to cover evil.

Read Text:

Joseph Rudyard Kipling is well known for his novel, *The Jungle Book*. I've enjoyed that story, but my favorite work by Kipling is his poem, *If*. This poem reflects much biblical wisdom and some of the virtues of Christ such as the challenge of being able to talk with crowds and keep your virtue, or walk with kings and not lose the common touch. But my favorite part is the challenge of meeting both triumph and disaster and treating those two imposters, just the same. In other words, success and adversity do not make you what you are, but they reveal what you are.

When you face trials and deep sorrow, you learn much about yourself. Part of what you learn is whether your faith in Christ is a faith of convenience or faith of conviction. But the other side of the coin is also true. When you encounter success and prosperity you also learn much about yourself. For some, the newfound comforts become "reasons" to make much of oneself. The comforts and cushions in life become "reasons" not to depend on God. Again, what you learn is whether your faith in Christ is circumstantial or convictional.

Another test of character is when someone is given authority and influence. Do they use it to make much of God by caring for and serving others, or to make much of self by trying to get others to serve them? Do they encourage and lift those around them, or do they want their picture and name everywhere? Do they want others to succeed, or do they try to take all the credit when things go well but blame everyone else when things don't? When we reject God's authority, we replace it with ourselves. However, our heads are not capable of wearing the crown. Beloved, we cannot be faithful Christians and reject the authority of Christ and his word.

In Isaiah 57.15 God says, *"I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit."* Then in Isaiah 66 after saying that heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool, God says, (2b) *But this is the one to whom I will look; he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word."* Why is that? Here is one of the most difficult truths for mankind to grasp. God cannot be bought. God is not impressed with powerful people. In fact, people who are impressed with themselves are sadly people who trust themselves instead of God. They do not know nor admit how much they need God. But if you do not have a proper view of yourself then you will not recognize your need of Christ. Instead of living a humble life dependent on God, you will think that life is about you and you will look for ways to get your way, be seen, heard, affirmed and in power. People around you will merely be things to step on so you can get to where you want to go.

However, when you realize who God is, and who you really are before him, then you will be humbled by your need of Christ. This is what Jesus points out to the religious leaders again, in

Luke 20.41-44. They hate Christ because they want to be large and in charge. So now, Jesus speaks to his disciples and warns them about the Scribes. This prophetic warning is serious and we would be wise to take it to heart. Beloved, those whom the world exalts, you do not need to be impressed with nor intimidated by. In fact, beware of them.

1. The Audience (45)

When the Pharisees and Scribes were unwilling to admit the truth about God's Word, Jesus turned to his disciples and gave them this warning. Even though all the people could hear Jesus, this warning was given especially for leaders. Look at Luke 21.37-38. *And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. And early in the morning all the people came to hear to him in the temple to hear him.*" During the day, Jesus and the disciples are surrounded by the crowds, but at night Jesus is with his disciples. So, what Jesus says here, could have waited until the evening if he wanted this to be for the disciples only. But he gives this warning to the disciples in a way that everyone else could hear because all of us are prone to making much of ourselves.

And yet the disciples are singled out. Why? The disciples are entrusted with the most valuable commodity that has ever existed: the gospel. Everyone needs the gospel. What happens when something of inestimable value is in play? People who have access to it, will look to profit from it. Last year, American wagered \$167 billion in sports gambling. That's even more than Elon Musk's weekly allowance. We are not surprised that players, coaches, and officials are going to be caught up in illegal activity related to that. There is so much at play that it is too tempting for many people not to take advantage of the influence they have to profit it from it. That is human nature. People do that in politics. People do that on boards, commissions, or just about any position of influence.

The absolute worst form of corruption is corruption by spiritual leaders. And sadly, the history of Christianity is pot marked by people who are willing to use their spiritual influence for evil. God's Word speaks to the deepest and most personal matters of our hearts. Therefore, the person teaching or preaching the Word has a door, it seems into our souls. The Word of God creates a relationship of trust. Sadly, there are people who will take advantage of that relationship of trust because when it comes to spiritual leaders, many people want to believe the best about them. That is commendable for the people, but it can be dangerous to the leaders. That is why Jesus warned the disciples.

In addition to that, the word of God is about the gospel. The gospel is the most precious commodity in the universe because the gospel is the only means by which you can have eternal life with God. Cornerstone Baptist Church does not own the gospel. No man owns the gospel. Therefore, it is not for sale. But some will tell you that salvation is only in the church, therefore the church (think leaders) sets the terms for who gets it and they can dispense it to whom they want or to whom will buy it from them. That is not true. A faithful, biblical church is called to examine a profession of faith and affirm that profession when it is faithful to the Scriptures in content and life. But the church does not own it. If the church did own it, or if the ruler of the

church owned it, then that church or ruler would be tempted to sell it to someone who gave a large donation or overlook sin because of it. That has been a corrupting influence in many branches of Christianity.

The crowds, the disciples and now us are faced with two radically different paths of leadership that reflect two completely different hearts. Jesus, who has all power, has humbled himself, he has come to die for us that he might share his authority with us. The Scribes and Pharisees have acquired temporary power and use it to extort others, take advantage of others, in order to exalt themselves. Which path are you walking in? How do you use your influence? Jesus is telling his disciples that leadership in his kingdom is not a means to get ahead to be a big deal. Do not look at how you can use your position to profit from it. Sadly, Judas Iscariot was planning to do that exact thing. Here is a warning from Jesus to him and to us.

2. **The warning** (46-47a)

Jesus used this word (translated “beware”) several times. Most of the time it was used as a warning against hypocrisy. (Matt. 6.1; 7.15; 16.6) Here Jesus warns his disciples to beware of the scribes. What do you think? Is Jesus warning them to stay away from the scribes because they are dangerous? Or is he warning them not follow their example? I think the weight of this warning is NOT to follow their example because look at the end of v.47. “*They will receive the greater condemnation.*” Do not do what they are doing because this is what is going to happen to them and if you follow them, this will be your end as well. So, what are we to be aware of?

A. **We are prone to making much of ourselves/others.** (46)

Beware of the Scribes. Beware of thinking that being in a respected group (as the Scribes were) or having a particular title is your ticket to significance and respect. That is selfish ambition. Is there a title, a position, or an office that you long to have because you think it will cause others to think better of you? Do you live with a level of frustration because you don’t have it and you are threatened by others who do? Are you willing to use people to get you where you want to go and then discard them when they have served that purpose? Jesus sees through that and what is more, that is not what following Jesus looks like. Jesus warns about the danger of titles.

Related to that is the matter of uniforms or dress. The scribes wore long, flowing robes that were part of an elaborate wardrobe. We all know the significance of uniforms in military or royalty settings. They are designed to separate the lowly from the mighty. Jesus is condemning the wearing of clothes that are intended to draw attention to their own inflated importance. We are to be on our guard about dressing for the purpose of intimidating.

The Jewish Talmud consists of 42 volumes of debates by Jewish rabbis about the law, philosophy, theology and biblical interpretation. It also addresses the required and proper ways to address a teacher of the law in public. This was thing! Jesus said that these guys “*loved greetings in the marketplaces.*” They loved the respectful attention they received in public. Anyone who demands to be addressed with a formal title in the context of a church does not

understand servant leadership. It is our practice not to address any of our elders with titles for this very reason. I am not suggesting that in other settings people are sinning by calling someone Pastor so and so, or that the guy is arrogant, but I think that while the titles can be used in a respectful way, they are dangerous to create an unnecessary gap that feeds the illusion that some people are intrinsically better than others. Beware of titles and if there is someone who demands to be called a religious title, I think you should run.

Related to that is having designated seats of honor in the synagogue. Jesus is not condemning the use of specific seating that may be practical and helpful. He is condemning the love of the best seats because sitting there gives one the image of respect. Making an idol out of respect goes beyond the synagogue life. These guys expected (demanded) to be seated next to the hosts at feasts. This is arrogance.

Jesus is condemning this as self-worship. And if you are generally concerned about where you are sitting at events or receptions and prone to feeling slighted or overlooked then this is a good word for you. Your righteousness and standing are not based on any of those things but on the righteousness of Christ, alone. That is all that you need. Titles, respect, reputation, honors and esteem is a temptation to make much of us instead of God. Beloved, do not be in awe of, nor approve of arrogant people. Pride is sinful. It is despicable to God. Therefore, we do not respect pride nor seek to be that proud person. When you see pride, it is to be pitied and to be wary of.

B. We are prone to use good or power as a cover for evil. (47a)

Jesus now shows how these desires for affirmation lead to more issues. We all long to be validated and instead of finding our identity in Christ, we think that if we are made much of by people we respect, then we are good. In other words, if people treat me with respect, then I am something and if I am something then I have privileges. If people are under my authority, then I am something and I am the law and I can do what I want. What do these guys want? Clearly, they are greedy for respect, but Jesus exposes another thing. They are plain greedy and use the respect as a means to feed their greed for money. Jesus teaches and models a radically different way of exercising authority. Authority, influence and power do not fundamentally come with privileges but with responsibility. That responsibility begins with setting the example.

In the case of the scribes, their job was to interpret the law. The OT law was their Bible that was their national constitution. It was legal and religious. Part of genius of God's law was how it protected the little guy. These scribes, as interpreters and practitioners of the law functioned as lawyers and would be appointed as trustees of estates. Instead of helping the widows whose husbands had died, these guys would steal from the estate or steal the estate itself. The widows were defenseless. They needed the protection of the law so that their property left to them following the death of their husband would benefit them. God gave the law, in part, because he cares about the little guy. He wants the vulnerable to be protected. Now, at their most vulnerable point, when the law of God was to protect them, these Scribes abused the law and created a system where they could "legally" steal from the widows. These guys used their legal position to essentially destroy the people who had no one to defend them in order to enrich

themselves or their cronies. On the outside, they were religious pomp and show, but behind the scenes they devoured widows. And the widows had no recourse. The Sanhedrin was the power that ruled and the Scribes abused that position to enrich themselves all in the name of God.

God's economy is a reflection of God's character. God is all-powerful. He could use his power to crush us if he wanted to, but to what end? God already has all that he needs. For God so loved the world that he gave. He gave himself. He gave his one and only Son to come and die for us that we might be able to be forgiven, declared righteous, be at peace with him, and live with him and enjoy him forever.

We are grieved, but not surprised when someone abuses their authority to impose their sinful will and desires upon those who have no recourse. We hear about bad apples in law enforcement who use the badge to shake people down, or city officials who accept bribes in exchange for awarding contracts. Praise God there are many honorable ones, but the bad ones, like the chaos that erupted in Maine this week, tend to get all the attention. We're numb to politicians who abuse their power by abusing others, but, when someone, like a scribe, is representing the very word of God, or in our day, when a minister abuses people, the consequences are devastating. The betrayal of trust is so catastrophic that many simply never get over it. Why is that betrayal so deep? Because, our very Creator, Savior, Provider, Protector, Refuge and Rest is now represented by those who steal, lie, even molest. The very One we have to have for salvation and comfort is represented by those who are corrupt.

Jesus said that Satan is a thief who comes to lie, steal and destroy. These Scribes were lying, stealing and destroying. Instead of faithfully representing God, they were advancing the work of Satan. It was the system they created and they protected each other. However, God knows who attacks the defenseless and while they appeared to be getting away with it, Jesus just put them on notice that he knew what was going on and their day in court, in the final court, was coming.

In order to aid in their deceitfulness, these guys would pray long prayers in public. If they really cared about God, they would care about the people of God. But the long prayers gave them credibility to the people who would then be more confident that they feared God and would name them as trustees to handle their estates with integrity and take care of the widows left behind. Their long prayers were part of their game of greed and only added to their judgment.

3. **The Consequence** (47b)

They will receive the greater condemnation." Jesus seems to be telling us that there are degrees of judgment, which I take to be degrees of punishment in hell. This is no game. When people in power get away with abusing their power, it causes so many to simply give up. You can't fight the system. But that is not actually the case. In a few days, these men who appeared to be in power, would once again abuse that power to crucify Christ. They executed an innocent man in order to protect their power and privileges. This was not a problem unique to Jewish leaders. It looked for a bit that they got away with murder. But then Jesus rose again and the news of his resurrection while glorious to us, was absolutely terrifying to them.