

Title: Critical Issue #3
Text: Luke 21.1-4
Theme: Complete dependency
Series: Luke
Aim: I aim to help my people understand what complete faith looks like and call them to it.

Show coin to kids

Read Text:

1. **The Rich and the Poor** (1-2)

The economy of Israel during the time of Christ was far different than anything most of us have experienced unless you have spent some time in Haiti or other similar nations. The rich were only 1-2% of the population. This group would include the Sadducees who controlled the office of high priest. Whoever controlled that position controlled the money that came in from the Temple Tax. Every Jew had to give money to the temple in the form of a tax. The high priest controlled where that went and of course, much of it ended up in the pockets of the high priest. This is at the heart of why the Sadducees were so hell-bent on killing Jesus. He threatened their system. They were using “God” as an opportunity to get rich.

Some of the other ultra-wealthy made their money through their land-holdings. Wealth in those days was land that was worked by laborers who turned it into food that was sold for money which gave the wealthy privilege and power. The more land you had, the more money you could make. Since the truly wealthy were such a small percentage of society, they would often circle the wagons to protect one another. Therefore, (from last week), the scribes would use their positions as lawyers to steal land from widows and give it to themselves and their cronies.

Beyond the 1-2% who were actually wealthy, came the 7-10% who were not destitute. They were not rich, but they had it slightly better than most. These would be the artisans, traders, master builders (think general contractors), metal workers, merchants and some of the mid-sized farmers. It was difficult for a mid-sized farmer to compete with the big dogs because of the massive imperial taxes from Rome as well as the religious taxes from Jerusalem. This meant that there was not that much left over.

The rest of the population (about 90%) were basically subsistent farmers, share croppers, day laborers who farmed land so they could eat. These people constantly lived on the edge. They had no margin to speak of. If it did not rain, or rained too much they did not have a harvest and they did not eat. These people were constantly at the mercy of forces way beyond their control and many of them would have to take out loans that would destroy them and again, be the occasion for many to lose the little land they did have.

Of this 90%, a third of them were the poorest of the poor. These were disabled persons, orphans, widows with no family and unskilled laborers. Workers like this would take risks to keep jobs, would get hurt and without medical care, would become unfit. They barely lived and if they did, it was at the mercy of others.

Most of the wealthy people lived in what we now call the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem. In the time of Christ, it was the Upper City that was on the west side of the Temple complex. It had ornate and lavish mansions that were multi-storied, with private ritual baths, imported frescoes and other rare luxuries like private stone bathtubs. Some of the wealthy lived elsewhere but most were in Jerusalem. The gap between the wealthy and the poor was virtually uncrossable. A wealthy person could squander his wealth and be reduced to poverty, but a poor person could never really expect to be anything other than poor. Matthew Watkins was the basketball student manager for MSU. When he got this position, he was informed up front, to not even think about trying out for the team. It doesn't work like that. Well, after three years as a student manager, he did try and he earned a spot on the roster as a walk-on. It is rare. That is sort of how it was in 1st century world. If you were born into a lower class, you would not even think about moving up the ladder. It rarely if ever happened. The system simply did not allow it or provide a portal for that. There was simply no path for a poor person to be able to get rich. The poor were not educated and because there were so many poor people, their wages were kept low. If you quit your job because it didn't pay enough there were 10 people waiting to take it. Poverty was everywhere. It was crippling and there were no social safety nets.

Our setting is quite different. Public education is available. Health care is available. Many social services are available. Scholarships, training programs, tutoring, etc. provide paths today that simply did not exist in those days. If you are born into or raised in poverty today, you have more challenges than those who aren't, but you have so many more opportunities than they ever had back in the time of Christ. While there is the conversation about how to care for the poor, within Christianity there is no debate that we are to care for the poor. It is good for us to acknowledge that for many in this country the reason why there are so many social safety nets is because of the Judeo-Christian ethic that we have.

I've given this background because Luke addresses the poor and the rich more than the other gospel writers. He highlights them in 2.37; 4.25-26; 7.12; and then in Acts 6.1-7; and 9.39). He does it because the ministry of Christ was so heavily influenced by this distinction. Most of the ministry of Christ was in Galilee and with the poor people. Therefore, Jesus was already considered to be beneath the dignity of the elite in Jerusalem and yet they feared him. They were used to being able to use their money and power to do anything that needed to get done. Jesus, they could not stop. And since the wealthy controlled the highest religious position in the country, people assumed that the wealthy were favored by God and the poor were disfavored. Jesus turns that on its head! As we have seen, his kingdom is not like man's kingdoms. Jesus is the king of the upside-down kingdom. He has a radically different view of power and he has a radically different economic system and once again, he is about to shock his disciples.

2. Jesus sees it all. (1-2)

Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus had taken a seat in the Temple area. He is people-watching. Have you ever done that in a public place? I like doing that in airports or other venues. I am always amazed at the incredible variety of people there are. I used to think that at some point God would run out of facial options and we'd start to see repeats, but I don't think that has happened yet. Jesus is people watching and he is watching "*the rich putting their gifts in the offering box.*"

The Temple area was massive and there was more than one place where people could give money by depositing it into boxes, receptacles or in one place, there were 13 trumpet-shaped receptacles that functioned like funnels. They didn't have Venmo. You could not wire your money in. Neither did they have dollar bills. All currency was coinage. The temple tax had to be paid with the Tyrian Shekel which got its name because it was minted in Tyre. People also used the Roman denarius which was equivalent to a day's wage. Then there was the Prutah which was smaller and of lower value. Finally, there was the lepton or the mite, which was the smallest of them all in size and value.

This week during Vacation Bible School, the kids brought money to help fund a missions project. The kids were divided up into two teams and every day was a contest to see which side brought in the most in terms of weight. But here is our quandary. 9 pennies far outweigh a dime. 20 pennies far outweigh a quarter. Just because one side has the heavier offering does not mean that it is the most valuable. But in the time of Christ, the heavier the coin, the more valuable it was. Therefore, if the rich are bringing in their gifts and they are the heavier coins and there are many of them and they are dumping them into the trumpet-shaped receptacles, what is the effect? The noise from that would be loud. What happens when you hear or see money flying around? That gets everyone's attention!

I was at a Tigers game a few years ago when a foul ball came very close to where I was sitting. We all stood to reach for it, and given my impressive stature, I had no chance. But the guy behind me did. Apparently, he had his hand in his pocket and in his pocket was a significant wad of money. When he pulled his hand out, out came his money and these were Ben Franklins. He had no idea that he just gave an offering to the church. Seriously, me and the guys with me started picking them up and we handed them all back. But people were looking very carefully under their seats and everywhere else. So, when money is clanging into the receptacle it would sound impressive and people would look and what? It would feed the idea that the rich are more favored by God, not only because of the long prayers (20.47) but also because of the loud offerings.

Jesus is sitting there and watching. The rich are putting in their coins, but someone else is there; a widow. She did not look like the rich because she wasn't. She may not have been seen by others and her offering would not have been heard. This widow put two tiny coins in. Compared to what the rich put in, hers did not even appear to register. If you were assigned to do the accounting and record keeping, coins like this would be irritating since they would not even be worth your effort to sort, log and deposit. A denarius was equivalent to a day's wage for a

common laborer which meant that it was still a modest amount. A lepton? A mite? One of these was worth 1/128th of a denarius. It was a fraction of a cent. This widow had two of them. She only had two. And she put them in.

All of this sets up the point of the story that Jesus is about to give. But we need to note this. The rich were few, mighty and known. The widows were many, weak and insignificant. This widow would have just been another poor, nameless person easy to overlook. But Jesus saw her. Jesus watched her. We've all felt overlooked, unnoticed, not worth the time of others. We all wonder if what we do really matters. Do our acts of faithfulness do anything to move the needle of God's work? It is a two-fold question: Do I matter and does anything that I do matter? You are a tired mom whose life is owned by the sleeping and eating demands of little ones who consume everything around them. You are a single dad trying to be faithful for your children and wondering if it will make any difference in this world? You are one of the few believers in your family and you are treated like a disease. Take heart. Jesus sees. He sees it all. And what is more, look at what he does.

He calls to his disciples and says in essence, you have to see this. See that widow? He points her out because they probably didn't notice. Remember that the Temple area (Temple mount) was about 36-37 acres in size. It was the Passover week, so hundreds of thousands of people would be in Jerusalem and would be coming to the Temple. In this mass of humanity, Jesus sees her and now he wants to make sure that his disciples see her. He points her out because she is going to be an example in the sermon of Christ. There is no indication that she ever knew that Jesus saw her until she was in heaven. She is known now and now she knows it. Has it ever occurred to you that God may point you out to others because he is so blessed by your faithfulness behind the scenes? He did that with Job and Job was probably not the only one that God has noticed.

This widow's gift was a costly act of faith that may have been unnoticed by others, but Jesus saw it. He always does. He always will. And sometimes he uses it to encourage others.

3. Kingdom Values (3-4)

All through Luke's gospel we've seen how Christ is the king of what appears to us to be an upside-down kingdom. The truth is, our kingdoms are upside down. Jesus tells us that the way to live is to die. The way to win is to be last. The way to lead is to serve. Here is another example of Kingdom Economics or what is truly valuable. Jesus in essence brings out his kingdom scales. In this tray is the wealth of all of the rich. Not just one of the wealthy, but all of them. In this scale are the two mites of the widow and Jesus says that hers is more.

I want us to be honest with the text. That means that don't say less than what the text says, nor do we say more. Is Jesus throwing shade on the rich who were giving their Temple offering? Is this a subtle criticism of them? No. Jesus does not hold back correction when it is needed no matter who the audience is. He is not saying that offering of the rich was bad, or they were bad and we should not imply that. Jesus was using the sacrificial gift of the widow to make a very

important point and we need to think clearly about this. So, let's make certain that we understand what that point is and isn't. For example, did Jesus say that we all need to give to the church like the widow? No. Is Jesus implying that if you don't give until it hurts, that your gift doesn't count? No. Did he say that all widows and poor people need to give all their money to the church like the widow? No. What exactly did Jesus say? *"This poor widow has put in more than all of them."* In other words: (and here is a kingdom value) ***True worth is not measured in dollars and cents, but in faith-driven obedience.***

Jesus knew that the gift of this widow was an expression of her utter dependency on God and he wants to make certain that his disciples understand this. It is not the size of the gift that determines the ultimate value but the faith that motivates it. Giving money may or may not be a reflection of faith. In her case it was and Jesus is pointing that out.

Also notice that Jesus did not say that she was now going to win the lottery. Jesus did not say that her sacrifice in giving was now going to bring a windfall and that she was going to get rich. He was just saying that true worth is not measured in dollars and cents, but in faith-driven obedience. We don't give to get money. We give because we love God, believe God and trust in him more than we trust in money.

This is a good corrective for us. Next Sunday night, we are going to be reviewing our 2nd quarter reports as part of our Member's Meeting. If we are ahead of budget in our giving, we are tempted to think that the church is doing great, but if we are behind that something is wrong. Beloved, true worth is not measured in dollars and cents, but in faith-driven obedience. The church is Laodicea was wealthy but their wealth was the occasion for them to think highly of themselves and not trust in God. They had money, they really didn't need God now. And Jesus said of them that they were wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.

Another related kingdom value is this: ***Jesus is worth a faith-driven obedience that costs us something.*** For this widow, her sacrifice was expressed in her gift of the coins. Her gift was a sacrifice. As a poor widow, she didn't have to give this. And if she wanted to give something, she could have given one of the mites. Jesus would not have been bothered by that at all. But her giving was a faith-driven obedience that cost her something. Jesus commends this, because this is a hallmark of the life of a believer.

In this last section Luke records 3 accounts that I have labeled as 3 critical issues. 1) Who is Jesus (20.41-44). You have to know that Jesus is truly God and truly man. 2) What are evidences of one who genuinely loves God? It is not the appearance that impresses God, but the reality. Following God is seen in taking care of those who are under your care and not using your authority to club others and make much of yourself (21.45-47). 3) Genuine followers of God trust him completely and are willing to stake everything they have on him. A faith and love like that, God delights in. This is perfectly displayed in Christ who would go to the cross because he believed in his Father's plan and loved making his Father's heart of mercy known even as he loved us all the way to and through the cross.