

"TWO KINDS OF PIETY"

I. Introduction

- A. The two brief teachings of Jesus in this text provide us with two contrasting pictures of piety, two different ways of practicing one's religion.
- B. On the one hand, there is the piety of the scribes, which is a piety of pretense, a piety that is really only concerned with looking good before others and gaining their admiration.
- C. On the other hand, there is the piety of this poor widow, which is a piety that is both sincere and sacrificial, even though it may not look very significant in the eyes of others.
- D. Our Lord calls our attention to these two pictures of piety so that they may serve as examples for us.
- E. The piety of the scribes is an example that we must avoid, and the piety of the widow is one that we should strive to emulate.

II. Piety That Seeks Its Own Honor

- A. Our passage begins with Jesus saying, "Beware of the scribes."
 - 1. Our Lord wants us to be on guard against the kind of religion that is practiced by the scribes.
 - 2. The scribes were part of Israel's religious leadership.
 - 3. They focused on copying, interpreting, and teaching God's law.
 - 4. Many of the scribes were Pharisees, and the Pharisees were held in high esteem by first century Jews.

5. Telling people to beware of the scribes would be like telling Christians today to beware of pastors and theologians.
 6. Now, there certainly are some pastors and theologians in our day of whom people should beware, but it would not be fair to say this about pastors and theologians in general.
 7. The fact that Jesus would say such a thing about Israel's leaders indicates how corrupt the religion of God's covenant people had become in the first century.
 8. The men who were regarded as the most devout of all were by and large religious frauds.
- B. Ministers certainly can be prone to the kind of piety that the scribes practiced.
1. It can be easy to lose sight of the fact that ministry is a matter of service, not a matter of seeking acclaim.
 2. We need to guard against this.
 3. But it is not only those who are in positions of leadership who need to be on guard against a piety of pretense.
 4. There are many ways that we can fall prey to the temptation to use our religion as a means of seeking our own honor.
 5. Good works can be done out of selfish motives.
 6. Faithfulness can become a grounds for pride.
 7. Knowledge can be pursued for the sake of puffing ourselves up.
 8. Social media accounts can be meticulously curated so as to craft an especially godly image to set before others.

9. Even calling attention to our “brokenness” can become an ironic means of exalting ourselves in the eyes of others.
 10. Our hearts are deceitful, and we need to be aware of the danger of using our religion as a means of obtaining admiration and acclaim.
- C. Jesus says that the scribes like to walk around in long robes in order to draw attention to themselves and be the object of people’s veneration.
1. They like to be greeted in the marketplaces and to be given the seats of honor in the synagogues and at feasts.
 2. The Jewish people were supposed to rise whenever a scribe would pass by.
 3. The scribes also liked to pray extra long prayers, not because they genuinely wanted to seek the Lord, but because they wanted to show off before others.
 4. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with wearing a distinctive uniform, or being respected for holding an important office, or being fervent in prayer.
 5. But Jesus knew the scribes’ hearts, and he reproved them for their pretentiousness.
 6. He also points out that the scribes devour widows’ houses.
 7. Scribes were not paid for their work but depended upon benefactors for their living.
 8. And like some modern televangelists, they were not above using manipulative strategies to get more money out of people.
 9. They often preyed upon widows and others who were especially susceptible to their ploys.

10. All in all, the religion of the scribes was not about God, but about themselves.
- D. The problem with a piety of pretense is that it is purely external.
1. It is not reflective of true devotion to God in the heart.
 2. It uses religious practices in order to obtain worldly ends.
 3. The scribes did not do these things out of sincere love for God but out of love for self.
 4. They did them because they loved to be admired.
 5. The scribes serve as a warning to us, reminding us that God takes no pleasure in acts of piety that are only done externally, acts that are done without any true involvement of the heart.
 6. As John Owen once wrote, "The most costly sacrifice will not be accepted unless it is given from the heart." [*Spiritual-Mindedness*, 133]
 7. Our worship, our prayers, our hearing and reading of the Word, our singing, our giving, our obedience, our acts of service - these things do not mean anything to God if they are not done in sincerity, if they are not done from the heart.
 8. Insincere religion is the religion of the scribes.
 9. And this is the judgment that Jesus pronounced upon the religion of the scribes: "They will receive the greater condemnation."
 10. This leads J.C. Ryle to say, "Whatever else we are in religion let us be true. However feeble on faith, and hope, and love, and obedience may be, let us see to it that they are real, genuine, and sincere. Let us abhor the very idea of play-acting and mask-wearing in our Christianity."

III. Piety That Seeks God's Honor

- A. The second kind of piety in our passage is that of the widow.
 - 1. Her offering consisted of two of the smallest Jewish coins in circulation, each of which was worth about one-eighth of a penny.
 - 2. Even if we take inflation into account, this was a very insignificant gift.
 - 3. But as Jesus watched her place it in the offering container, he knew that it was a gift that cost her dearly.
 - 4. Widows in that culture were among the most vulnerable people in society.
 - 5. The loss of a husband would mean the loss of all income, and there was no Social Security in those days.
 - 6. If a widow did not have family that could take care of her, her situation could easily become quite desperate.

- B. Luke specifies that this woman was a poor widow.
 - 1. Every penny would have mattered to her, yet she placed both of her coins in the offering receptacle.
 - 2. It would have been reasonable for her to keep at least one of the coins for herself.
 - 3. We might even be inclined to think that that would have been the wiser course of action.
 - 4. But she gave both of her coins to the Lord.
 - 5. This caused Jesus to take notice.

6. It caused him to say that her offering surpassed the offerings of others who were giving far more than what she was giving.
 7. Her gift did not seem like much, but it really cost her something.
 8. And she gave it freely, not under compulsion, not grudgingly.
 9. She was a cheerful giver.
- C. What was it that motivated this woman to give such an extravagant and costly (for her) gift to the Lord?
1. I think we have to conclude that it was her love for the Lord.
 2. The only way anyone comes to a true love of God is by first experiencing his love for us.
 3. We love because he first loved us.
 4. Our love for God is the grateful response to the love that he pours out upon us in Christ.
 5. The widow's offering reminds us that love looks for a way to express itself.
 6. Love is not just a feeling or a sentiment.
 7. Love shows itself, and the fervency with which it is expressed is an indicator of the fervency of the love itself.
 8. People who have a true love for God seek out tangible ways of expressing their love for him.
 9. Sometimes, as in the case of this widow, a person's love for God is expressed in especially extravagant ways.
 10. And whenever that happens, it is always because that person has an especially keen sense of the greatness of God's love for them.

- D. This reminds me of a story that I once read about one of the men who participated in the famous Doolittle Raid against Japan in World War II.
1. The Doolittle Raid was a daring effort made in response to the attack upon the U.S. military base at Pearl Harbor.
 2. The man's name was Jacob DeShazer, and he and the crew of his plane were taken prisoner by the Japanese after a crash landing in occupied China.
 3. DeShazer endured nearly three and a half years of cruel and inhumane treatment at the hands of his captors.
 4. Half of the eight members of his plane's crew died in captivity.
 5. But it was during this time of imprisonment that the Lord worked his saving grace in DeShazer's heart.
 6. The Japanese gave him and his fellow prisoners a Bible that they had taken from a missionary's house, and the Lord worked through his Word to bring DeShazer to saving faith in Christ.
 7. He would later describe this experience in these words: "On June 8th, 1944, the words of Romans 10:9 stood out boldly before my eyes: 'If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.' In that very moment God gave me grace to confess my sins to him, and he forgave me and saved me for Jesus' sake... How my heart rejoiced in my newness of spiritual life, even though my body was suffering so terribly from the physical beatings and lack of food. But suddenly I discovered that God had given me new spiritual eyes, and that when I looked at the Japanese officers and guards who had starved and beaten me and my companions so cruelly, I found my bitter hatred for them changed to loving pity... I read in my Bible that while those who crucified Jesus on the cross had beaten him and spit on him before he was nailed to the cross, he tenderly prayed in his moment of excruciating suffering, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.' And now from the

depths of my heart, I too prayed for God to forgive my torturers..." [Stephens, *War and Grace*, 143-4]

8. Do you know what this man did after was released and returned home to America?
 9. He went back to Japan as a missionary.
 10. He wanted to tell the Japanese people about the love of God in Jesus Christ.
 11. He even sought out one of his prison guards and told him about Christ, and that guard became a Christian.
 12. DeShazer would end up spending thirty years of his life as a missionary in Japan.
 13. Why did he do this?
 14. Why did he give so much of himself to bring the gospel to a people whom he had once hated?
 15. He did it because his experience of God's love incited a deep love for God within him, and he wanted to express that love in an extravagant manner.
- E. The key to cultivating a great love for God in your heart is to reflect more and more upon the greatness of God's love for you in Christ.
1. Look at your sin.
 2. Consider how unworthy of God's love you really are.
 3. Think of the times when you have doubted God; the times when you have betrayed him; the times when you have been ashamed of him; the times when you chose to sin even though you knew full well that it was wrong.

4. And then think of what Paul says in Romans 5:8: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."
 5. Think of the words that the Lord speaks through the prophet Isaiah: "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (Isa. 1:18)
 6. Sacrificial love for God is produced in us when we become more and more aware of the magnitude of God's love for us.
 7. In the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, John Calvin describes his conversion by saying that God "turned my course in another direction."
 8. Calvin could see that God had turned his life around, and he responded to this by giving himself wholeheartedly to the Lord.
 9. As a symbol of his devotion, he adopted as his personal seal a flaming heart resting in the palm of an open hand with these words: "My heart, I give you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely."
 10. That is the kind of piety that the Lord wants from his people.
 11. He wants us to give him our hearts, promptly and sincerely.
- F. How can you follow the example of the poor widow in our text?
1. One obvious way is to be faithful in tithing and giving to the church.
 2. God wants his people to give generously and habitually to support the cause of the gospel.
 3. He does not need our money to advance his kingdom, but he tests the vitality of our faith by calling us to take up a share in this ministry.

- G. Another way you can cultivate piety like that of the widow is by offering yourself to the Lord, not only at the high points in your life, but at your lowest points as well.
1. Will you continue to worship and serve God even when your trials seem utterly overwhelming to you?
 2. Think of what Job said when he was in the midst of his great suffering: "Though he slay me, I will hope in him" (Job 13:15a)
 3. Will you do that?
 4. Will you keep on trusting God, even when it seems that he is not blessing you?
 5. This is what the poor widow was doing when she placed her two coins in the offering box.
 6. It would have been easy for her to become bitter about her circumstances.
 7. She could have complained that God was being unfair to her, that it was unkind of him to subject her to the trials of widowhood.
 8. But she did not do that.
 9. She did not stay at home and bemoan her circumstances.
 10. She went to the temple.
 11. She worshipped the Lord.
 12. She gave him all that she had to live on.
 13. May God give us grace, that we too might exemplify that kind of piety.