

March 15, 2020
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
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OFFERING OR OSTENTATION?

Luke 20:34-21:7

Pat and I recently took in a Broadway production at the Peace Center. The sets, the costumes, everything about the on-stage scenes was spectacular. Glitz and glamour, sparkles and lights were impressive to say the least. A good word to describe the event would be ostentation. A typical dictionary definition of ostentation is “a pretentious, gaudy or flashy display, especially of wealth and luxury, intended to impress or attract notice.”

We should expect to experience ostentation in a theatrical production. We might also wonder if a play with breathtaking sets and costumes might require less able actors and actresses. I have watched plays that had minimal settings. In such cases the actors and actresses have to be on their game to keep the play from becoming a boring disaster. Ostentation alone can attract a lot of attention.

The sad thing about the word ostentation is when it is found in the church. Too often, it seems that local church ministries find it necessary to resort to the sound, glitz, and glamour of Broadway to carry out their God-assigned task of bringing glory to Him. If that statement sounds like a huge contradiction, you were listening well. What kind of thinking concludes that the loud, bright, smoky, flashing lights of the rock concert brings glory to God? Anyone with a lick of common sense will acknowledge that the only purpose served by ostentation is to attract the attention of fleshly people. Then, the argument goes, once we have their attention, we will tell them the good news that Jesus saves.

This is not just a modern dilemma. Luke recorded for us a setting in which that exact kind of thing was happening. There were plenty of self-righteous, ostentatious religionists hanging out near the

temple. Jesus warned His friends to beware of them. There was a poor widow who came to the temple to carry out her humble sacrifice to God. Jesus encouraged His friends to be like her. There were people who expressed satisfaction with the outward grandeur of the temple. Jesus revealed how out of focus their attention was. These are three very good lessons for all of us to learn or to remember again.

Showboat Religion (20:45-47).

Jesus’ warning to His followers demonstrated how our Savior desires for us to perceive the truth in the midst of falsehood. He warned His followers when *in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, “Beware of the scribes”* (vv.45-46).

That probably took some of the listeners by surprise because the scribes were very important in Israel’s religion. They were truly the experts in the study of Moses’ law. They descended from the Old Testament priests, especially in Ezra’s day. They were the originators of the synagogue service. To say that they were a very important part of Israel’s religious society is to make an understatement. These people claimed they were responsible to preserve the Law of Moses. But unfortunately, they also added their own laws to it. Eventually their laws superseded God’s law through Moses.

They were the teachers of the law and loved to have students gather around them and praise them. Nearly all scribes were of the Pharisee sect. They were very important to the people in that they seemed to show more concern for the people than the Sadducees did. We have a hard time imagining how much authority they held among the people. Even Jesus taught how the people should honor their position of authority. He told His own followers, *“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you – but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice”* (Matthew 23:2-3). It must have been pretty shocking for the populace to hear Jesus tell His disciples to watch out for these people.

Why did Jesus say that? What was His reason behind the warning? The answer to that question is found in Jesus’ explanation that followed His warning. He said that those guys *“like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who*

devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers (vv.46b-47).

The danger was that the religious leaders appeared to be very important. They walked around in long robes. Wasn't that permissible? God instructed His people to put tassels on the fringe of their garments in order to remind themselves of His commands (Numbers 15:38-40). It is possible that Jesus had these tassels on His robe (the word *fringe* in Matthew 9:20 also means tassel). Yes, but the scribes over-emphasized the tassels and made their robes rich and expensive looking to attract attention.

Furthermore, these men loved to receive greetings in the marketplace. It was not just that they loved for people to greet them, though they did. The problem was that they loved to hear the titles that exalted them above the "commoners." In Matthew's account, Jesus said that the hypocrites loved "*greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others*" (Matthew 23:7).

They also loved the chief places, like the best seats in the synagogues. They loved to be counted among the privileged folks who sat at the front. That gave them the privilege of looking at everyone else, and having everyone look at them. In the same way, they loved to have the places of honor at feasts. Every important dinner has seats of honor. These men worked at getting invited to sit among the dignitaries.

They also made long prayers in public intentionally to be noticed. These guys were like the orthodox Jews I have observed on the jet to Israel who stood in the aisle, draped in their prayer shawls, rocking back and forth praying so that others would see.

"What hypocrites," we say in all our sincere humility. Is it not possible or sometimes probable that we also work arduously to convince others that we are something we are not? Do we ever stop to wonder how religious leaders present themselves as great and then expect their praise for God's greatness to sound sincere? That is the fallacy of too many preachers, most contemporary Christian music artists, and probably most Southern Gospel groups.

The lesson Jesus taught here is that in spite of the airs they put on, the scribes, Pharisees, and the whole bunch in any day are very sinful people. Jesus pointed out that those very ostentatious people actually devoured widows' houses. Apparently, they were responsible

to manage houses for the needy widows. But instead of caring for the widows, they figured out ways to take their houses and use them for their own financial gain. Furthermore, those long and obvious prayers they made in public were pretentious. In spite of what they say, they don't pray to God. They pray to be heard by and praised by people.

In light of this fraud, our Savior warns us that such ostentation receives temporary reward. It is reward, but not God's reward. There is no God-given reward for self-righteous religion. Jesus taught, *Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 6:1)*. It is true that God gives such people no reward for their religious practices, but they may well receive a passing reward from other people for their self-righteousness. Jesus said, "*Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward*" (Matthew 6:1-2).

On the other hand, ostentation does receive permanent condemnation. "*They will receive the greater condemnation*" (v.47b). The word *condemnation* refers to eternal punishment. This statement reminds us that there are degrees of punishment (Luke 12:47-48). God will punish false teachers more severely than He punishes others. That is in keeping with how God's Word is often harsh, even caustic when calling out false religious teachers. The Bible refers to such people as demented fools (Hosea 9:7); reckless, treacherous men (Zephaniah 3:4); ravenous wolves (Matthew 7:15); blind guides of the blind (Matthew 15:14); fools (Matthew 23:17); whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27); brood of snakes (Matthew 23:33); hucksters peddling God's Word (2 Corinthians 2:17), and much worse.

Outright blatant error is not wise or good. But error sprinkled with Bible truth is deadly dangerous because the error is packaged in truth like rat poison in good grain. Blatant humanistic teaching is not nearly as dangerous as humanistic teaching sprinkled with Bible verses. A great danger in our culture is, and has been for a long time, preaching, teaching, and counseling that purports to be Bible. However, the perceptive and discerning Christian should be able to see that what is actually presented is human experience, human conclusions, human ideologies, supported by Bible verses. Here is an

important principle: Is this person telling us what the Bible says and how it applies to life, or is this person telling us what he thinks and trying to support it with a passing reference to God's truth?

It was quite obvious to the perceptive people that the religious hypocrites were all about show, and in reality their own opinions superseded God's law about which they bragged.

Humble Sacrifice (21:1-4).

The story about Jesus watching people in the treasury is not merely added on because there was no other place for Luke to put it. Actually, the story serves as a vivid illustration of the principle we just saw regarding the fallacy of the ostentatious.

Here we read about Jesus and the disciples watching rich people put offerings in the box. Kind of like watching people in the mall or at the airport while you are waiting for your flight. *Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box (21:1)*. It would have been a common sight for people who hung out at the temple. The offering box was located in the treasury. The treasury was an area in the temple precincts where thirteen trumpet-shaped copper offering boxes stood. Seven of the boxes had labels identifying the offerings as New Shekel Dues; Old Shekel Dues; Bird Offerings; Wood; Frankincense, and so on. Six boxes had the title "Freewill Offerings."

Jesus and the disciples sat nearby observing the people putting money in these boxes. As He watched, Jesus observed the rich people putting offerings in the boxes. One can imagine one of those ostentatious, richly-robed false teachers approaching the boxes, maybe with an entourage of followers. You can almost hear the sound above the din of the crowd as hundreds of coins clang into the copper trumpet-shaped boxes. Maybe this was a picture of what Jesus referred to as "sounding a trumpet before you when you give alms." (Matthew 6:2). Surely everyone was impressed by the generosity of the rich people. Not Jesus. To Him it was just so much ostentation.

Jesus also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins (21:2). The two small copper coins were generally worthless. They were called *lepta* the least valuable coin available in that day. They were worth less than 1/8 of a cent. This was all the woman had to

give. She was obviously poor. Her clothing (probably tattered) identified her as a widow. Widows and orphans were particularly vulnerable in a culture that abused them and preyed on them (like the religious leaders who devoured their houses). We can almost see her approaching the offering boxes quietly, trying to remain unnoticed.

Jesus watched this contrast in givers and then explained an important principle to the disciples. He contrasted the widow's humility to self-sufficiency of the rich. *And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them" (v.3)*. The wealthy people gave out of their abundance. The poor widow gave out of her poverty. Jesus contrasted the two and commended the woman for giving all she had. God's Word regularly draws contrasts through comparisons, especially in Wisdom literature where the wise is contrasted with the fool, the righteous with the evil, the diligent with the lazy and so on.

Here Jesus called attention to the difference between this poor, humble widow and the self-sufficient wealthy people. Obviously, the Lord commended the widow's heart attitude. The lesson is that humility is demonstrated by sacrifice. He said, *"For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on" (v.4)*. The poor widow gave all. She had two small coins. She could have split 50/50 with God. Most people would consider that kind of split to be a display of righteousness. That she gave all of it speaks of her relationship with God. She obviously loved God and trusted Him.

Let's not miss the irony of the event! The wealthy were pouring money into the treasury that maintained the ministry at the "house of God." The ministry of the temple was supposed to encourage people to love God and love others. But in reality, the whole system was corrupt. And one poor widow woman was not going to change it. Nevertheless, God's law was unchanged even though many of the leaders of God's people were corrupt. And so this poor woman was demonstrating what God required according to Jesus' answer when the scribe asked about the great command. Jesus reminded everyone, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27)*.

The poor widow had just demonstrated true love for God. Regardless of who was in charge, her heart was sincere. In spite of the fact that the flashy, showy religionists were corrupt, she loved God out of a sincere heart.

How Easy to Confuse the Two (21:5-7).

It appears that immediately after Jesus' contrast between the ostentation of the wealthy religionists and the humble love for God shown by the widow, someone (probably one of the disciples) blurted out a common response. This gave Jesus the opportunity to identify and correct the very problem the context presented. Someone acknowledged the beauty of the temple. *And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings (v.5).*

There is no doubt that Herod's remodeled second temple was awesome. Some of the largest blocks in the foundation of the temple are still visible in a tunnel at the base of the Western Wall. Those blocks measure 44' long x 9' high x 10' thick and weigh 520 tons. I have looked at those building blocks on a couple of occasions and have always been impressed. How did they move those blocks into place?

From the descriptions that have come from historians, the complex was astounding but the temple proper was breathtaking. Herod had used gold and marble in abundance. The temple proper was 150' high. Just the front doors were 50' tall. Surrounding the temple itself were porches with hundreds of pillars. Some of the porches were called Solomon's Porch, which is where Jesus taught during this passion week. The building process took years to complete. Herod began the project in 20 BC and took 10 years to complete basic construction. But in Jesus' day, it was still being "finished" as is evidenced by His detractors retorting, "*It has taken forty-six years to build*" (John 2:20). Actually, the temple was not even completed until AD 63, which was only seven years before Titus destroyed it. There is no doubt that the complex was impressive!

Was it wrong for Jesus' followers to be impressed? Nice things are not necessarily evil. We teach that God expects us to do the best

we can with what He gives us. Most of us believe that we should take care of the gifts God gives us. But there was a problem couched in the people's comment about the temple. The flesh is content to worship passing stuff, the bright, the glorious, the flashy, the pretty, the quality. We easily forget that many of the blessings and gifts God grants to us are passing things. Even much of our ministry is in the process of passing away. Only the humble service that is carried out only for the glory of God through the strength Christ gives will produce fruit that remains for eternity.

The good news is that King Jesus corrected the error. *He said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down"* (v.6). That seems like a very unkind and unacceptable statement. In the ears of the people who thought they were on the verge of the restored kingdom of Israel, that had to sound way out of line. What did Jesus mean by promising the destruction of God's house of prayer? He spoke of certain coming judgment. Viewed in the larger context of Old Testament prophecy which promised God's care for His people, and a restored kingdom over which Messiah reigns, this didn't make sense.

But within one generation (about 35 years at the most), Jesus' words would be fulfilled exactly by Titus and the Roman army. Finally fed up with Israel's rebellion, Titus Vespasian set up a siege against Jerusalem that eventually led to the total destruction of the city. Vespasian focused especially on the destruction of this temple that served as a rallying point for the Jews.

Wow! The temple would be destroyed? When? Inquiring minds want to know. Some things never change. In our age also, it seems like everyone wants to know when the world will end. *And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?"* (v.7). Why did they ask that question? The people sound a lot like people in our age who want to know the details about the coming Apocalypse. I find it ironic that the very people who deny God's existence, or at least reject His authority, who dismiss His Word out of hand, and who mock His people are some of the first people to talk about apocalyptic volcanoes, earthquakes, storms, floods of biblical proportion, or "end of the world" fires. It seems like there are a lot of folks who want to

know when these things will come to pass so that they can enjoy their sins right up to the last minute.

The bigger and more important question is not “when” but “why.” Why don’t people want to know why the destruction is coming? It is very interesting that in this story no one in the crowd asked, “Why will these things be?” Remember that these people made up the crowd that welcomed the promised King into the city with much fanfare. Which means that these people had actual, physical kingdom stuff on their minds. They were consumed with the mundane and passing. That is why they never rose up in rebellion against “Annas’ Bazaar.” That is why they did some sort of worship at a gaudy temple built by wicked Herod, probably with some of their tax money. They were impressed with the outward ostentation of the House of God, but had little concern for the God of the House.

So let’s answer the question they didn’t ask. Why would these things happen? Jesus already told them and would tell them again while teaching at the temple in these His last days of ministry. He said, *“Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate”* (Matthew 23:36-38). This judgment would come because the people wanted a flashy, powerful king who would make them look good. This judgment would come because the people rejected the suffering Savior.

How easy it is for us to be impressed with the big, the loud, the bright, the famous, the popular, the ostentatious, and being well-liked. Honest, humble, unrecognized, faithful service is not what most Christians are interested in. Let’s be more honest, a lot of the big and flashy religious stuff throughout the centuries has proven to be totally fake, the deceptive plan of Satan the enemy of the true Church. We do well to check our own hearts and judge our own attitudes and motives. Are we content to humbly serve Christ the King, loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind and loving our neighbor as ourselves? Is that sufficient for us?