

Religion Pure And Undefined.

Text: Mark 12:38-44

Suggested Hymns:

379, 347, 372, 377, 367

1) Not Hypocrisy, But Sincerity

2) Not Pride, But Humility

3) Not Greed, But Generosity

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Mark 12:38-44, ³⁸ *Then He said to them in His teaching, “Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, ³⁹ “the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, ⁴⁰ “who devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation.”*

⁴¹ *Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. ⁴² Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. ⁴³ So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; ⁴⁴ “for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood.” (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There is an old saying that says, “*Not all that glitters is gold.*” There is much religion and churchliness in the world, but not all is genuine. By way of contrast, the text before us speaks on *Religion Pure and Undefined.*¹ May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Religion Pure And Undefined Is Not Hypocrisy, But Sincerity

Our text begins, ³⁸ *Then He said to them in His teaching, “Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, ³⁹ “the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, ⁴⁰ “who devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers.*

There is a familiar ring in our text. The Scribes and Pharisees are our Lord's chief enemies. They have a high standing and influence. They are persistent, cunning, and ruthless in their methods of opposing Jesus. They were determined against Him.²

Jesus felt constrained to sound a last, comprehensive, and emphatic warning against them in Matt. chapter 23. Jesus says to them eight times, ***“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”*** His chief objection to them was their hypocrisy. Even prayer they profaned and disgraced, our text says that ***for a pretense [they] make long prayers.***

The true spirit of true prayer is that of fear, love, and trust in God above all things and that of right-minded concern for our own well-being as well as tender interest in the welfare of others. The Scribes and Pharisees prayed long and often, but their motive in so doing was selfish. Not the adoration of God, not for the good of others, but private and material gain dominated and actuated them. Their prayers were a pretence. This is what aroused the indignation of Jesus.

Hypocrisy and pretence are extremely loathsome to God. We read in Psalm 5:6, ***“You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; The LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.”*** God hates deceit. He hates them. He condemns them, and He solemnly cautions against them. Why?

The hypocrite not only has no religion, but abuses religion. He challenges the all-knowing God with his make-believe. An example of this is written in Acts 5:3-5, ***“But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? ‘While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.’”***³ ***“Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last.”***⁴

The hypocrite dastardly deceives and violates the trust of fellow-men. For example Judas. The hypocrite causes the heathen to blaspheme. We read in Romans 2:23-24, ***“You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?”***²³ ***“For ‘the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’”***²⁴

Guard against hypocrisy. It is a crime against God, a serious hindrance to the Church, and a great offence to the world. Sometimes people say that *“There are too many hypocrites in the Church.”* Such a comment is not always justified, yet it is true in some instances. Beware of the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees!

We are to imitate the sincerity of the poor widow. Content to be practically unknown, notwithstanding her hard lot in life, she was whole-heartedly dedicated to the Lord. Quietly, unassumingly, she worships in the Temple. Although under necessity to deny herself comforts and conveniences, yes, although left with barely enough to live, she yet puts the glory of God and the welfare of her neighbour above all else and brings her modest offering to the Temple treasury. Surely she was sincere in her devotion.

There are other examples of sincerity in Scripture. The young girl in 2 Kings 5:3, ² *And the Syrians had gone out on raids, and had brought back captive a young girl from the land of Israel. She waited on Naaman’s wife.* ³ *Then she said to her mistress, “If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! For he would heal him of his leprosy.”*

And Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2, ¹ *I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea,* ² *that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.* ³

Sincerity is a God-pleasing virtue. We read in 1 Samuel 16:7, ⁷ *But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”*

Scripture says in Proverbs 23:26, ²⁶ *My son, give me your heart, And let your eyes observe my ways.* ⁴

The faithful are sincere and pray for a full measure of it. Without sincerity we cannot have part in the gracious gifts of God. We read in Acts 8:21, ²¹ *“You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God.*

Let us always be sincere, with a true heart, as we read in Hebrews 10:22, ²²
let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

2. Religion Pure And undefiled Is Not Pride, But Humility

Such religion pure and undefiled will also banish all pride from us.

Our text says, *“Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, ³⁹ “the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts.”*

Christ’s words *“Beware of the scribes!”* was also directed against their desire for vanity, pomp and show. They loved to go in long clothing to show themselves as princes, judges, and gentlemen of the long robe.

Their going in such clothing was not sinful, but their loving to go in it, priding themselves in it, exalting themselves on account of it, demanding respect by it, in effect saying to their long clothes, as Saul to Samuel, *“Honor me now before [the] people.”⁵* This was a product of pride.

They loved salutations in the market-places, the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts. Thus they aimed to advance themselves. They coveted applause, and were fond of it.

But pride is an offence to God. We read in Proverbs 16:5, ⁵ *Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; Though they join forces, none will go unpunished.* It is at war with religion pure and undefiled, because it ignores sinfulness, prevents repentance, bars faith, hinders prayer, and makes true love, without which a man is nothing, impossible.

Recall 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, ¹ *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ² And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.*

Consider the Scribes and Pharisees on these points. Pride invokes the punishment of God. Isaiah 13:11, ¹¹ *“I will punish the world for its evil, And the*

wicked for their iniquity; I will halt the arrogance of the proud, And will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible.

Jeremiah 50:31-32, ³¹ *“Behold, I am against you, O most haughty one!” says the Lord GOD of hosts; “For your day has come, The time that I will punish you. ³² The most proud shall stumble and fall, And no one will raise him up; I will kindle a fire in his cities, And it will devour all around him.”*

Luke 1:51-52, ⁵¹ *He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. ⁵² He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly.*

Consider Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:28-31, ²⁸ *All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ At the end of the twelve months he was walking about the royal palace of Babylon. ³⁰ The king spoke, saying, “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?” ³¹ While the word was still in the king’s mouth, a voice fell from heaven: “King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: the kingdom has departed from you!*

Herod was no different as we read in Acts 12:21-23, ²¹ *So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. ²² And the people kept shouting, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” ²³ Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.*

There must be no pride among church-members on account of wealth, education, social standing, or any other factor.

Not pride, but humility, is religion pure and undefiled before God. Look at the widow of the text. Quietly and unassumingly she makes her way into the Temple, worships there to satisfy the longings of her humble heart. She has no desire to be seen and praised by others, she brings her offering and passes through to go about her daily tasks.

Such a heart is a delight to the Lord. We read in Isaiah 66:2, *“But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word. They shall have their reward as we read in Psalm 29:23, The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with peace.*

God will exult the lowly.⁶ Remember the tax collector in the temple,¹³ ***“And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’¹⁴ “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”⁷***

There are many reasons for humility. Our mortal estate,⁸ our sinfulness,⁹ and our utter dependence upon the goodness, mercy, and grace of God.

Let us follow the example of Christ as we read in Philippians 2:5-7, ⁵ ***Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.***

3. Religion Pure And Undeclared Is Not Greed, But Generosity.

Lastly, religion pure and undeclared before God is not greed, but generosity.

Beware of the scribes, Jesus said also because they had an unquenchable desire to make themselves rich, regardless of the needs of others. Greed shows no sympathy; otherwise the scribes would not have preyed on widows in their bereavement, as our text says,⁴⁰ ***“who devour widows’ houses.***

Greed shuns loving toil, otherwise the scribes would have rendered other and better service than mere lip-service and hypocritical prayers, ***and for a pretense make long prayers.***

Guard against greed. It is a sin against God. We read in Micah 2:1-2, ¹ ***Woe to those who devise iniquity, And work out evil on their beds! At morning light they practice it, Because it is in the power of their hand. ² They covet fields and take them by violence, Also houses, and seize them. So they oppress a man and his house, A man and his inheritance.***

It is a sin against the neighbour, as we read in Isaiah 5:8, ⁸ ***Woe to those who join house to house; They add field to field, Till there is no place Where they may dwell alone in the midst of the land!***

It is a sin against yourself, as we read in 1 Timothy 6:6-10, *⁶ Now godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. ⁸ And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.*

⁹ But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

Be not deceived. Greed wars against the soul.¹⁰ It makes Christianity impossible. It bars from heaven. Christ warns against greed, and He demands generosity.

The widow, also referred to in the text, distinguished herself by it. Despite her great poverty and widowhood she brings an offering to the Temple treasury. Without regard for self, she is whole-heartedly dedicated to God. She appreciates God's blessings received from worship in a practical manner.

We read in Psalm 116:12-14, *¹² What shall I render to the LORD For all His benefits toward me? ¹³ I will take up the cup of salvation, And call upon the name of the LORD. ¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD Now in the presence of all His people.*

She is generous indeed. Our text says, *⁴² Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans.*

⁴³ So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; ⁴⁴ "for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood."

Let us note well that these were Jesus' last moments in the temple. He was sitting in the court of the women, where the offerings were deposited into 13 trumpet-shaped receptacles. Jesus, the Son of God, was reading the hearts of the worshipers.

He also examines the hearts of all today who confess, *"I believe in God, the Father Almighty ... and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord."* Do we mean

it? Do our offerings of time, talents, and money prove it? His eye is upon us to see how we respond.

Many rich people gave much. Jesus did not say their gifts were not welcome or not needed. What Jesus wanted His disciples and us to note is that our gifts are acceptable only if they come from hearts filled with love and trust. That was true of this widow in a very special way.

Jesus had just spoken to the Scribes and Pharisees who *“devour widows’ houses.”* *Were some of these among the rich who gave much?* We are not told.

What the woman gave, of course, was very little in comparison with what the rich gave. It amounted to “two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.”

But the widow’s gift was not tiny in the eyes of Christ. Calling together His disciples — they had a lesson to learn even as we do — He told them that this widow had put in more than all the others. He knew this not because He had asked her, but because He as the Son of God could look into her heart. Jesus knows vastly more about us and all others than we know about ourselves.

Why did Jesus say that her gift was “more than all the others”? Unlike the rich, who had more than enough left over, she gave all she had. This was an act of worship, love, faith, and absolute trust. Finally, that is what it means to be a disciple.

The Lord measures our gifts by the spirit in which they are given. He does not ask us to empty our bank accounts, but He invites us to give Him ourselves. Then our gifts to His treasury will also be liberal, and our lives will become lives of true stewardship.

May God for Jesus’ sake through His Holy Spirit keep us from hypocrisy and grant us sincerity, banish all pride from our hearts, and plant humility there instead, and help us to root out all greed and cultivate generosity in place of it.

In conclusion, this event is particularly thrilling because we know the rest of the story. As mentioned before, this was Jesus’ last visit to the temple. From there He went forward to offer Himself — all that He is — on the cross to pay the price we could not pay, to make the contribution we could not make. On Good

Friday He paid the entire debt and for the moment became even poorer than this poor widow. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ James 1:27

² Matt. 21:12-18, 45-46

³ See also 2 Timothy 1:16-18

⁴ See also Jeremiah 29:13-14

⁵ 1 Samuel 15:30

⁶ Luke 1:52

⁷ Luke 18:13-14, see also Matthew 8:8-10 (centurion of Capernaum), Acts 10 (Cornelius)

⁸ Genesis 18:27, Psalm 8:4

⁹ Psalm 51:7, Isaiah 64:6

¹⁰ Matthew 6:24, Ephesians 5:5