

Luke 21:1-4

1 He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

This particular Scripture is one that I like a lot because it puts into perspective the disparity between God's expectations and the expectations of those that assume they are righteous and thereby revealing the power dynamics of institutionalism. Luke ends chapter 20 with a lesson warning against hypocrisy. Don't be like scribes; they desire to be venerated in public with their long robes and taking the best seats. They take from the poor and feign piety. Theirs is the greater condemnation.

The Scripture reveals to us what Jesus said and did. Jesus was watching the treasury. Jesus saw how much each person was putting into the offering and he noticed the poor widow and remembered her. He knew that she was a victim of oppression and that she was trying to survive in an unequal society. He knew that her contribution was the smallest in terms of financial value. He knew that others put in only the amount that they were comfortable contributing. The widow did not put in what she was comfortable with; she put in all she had to spare. She put in everything she had to live on. Jesus teaches that which is of the highest value. The person is more valuable than the institution and the offering of sacrifice is more valuable than the offering of comfort.

I frequently research, contemplate, and reflect on the reasons why contemporary religion is in decline nationally. There are more theories than I can count and there are also more books and periodicals than I can count. Recently came across an article titled *30 Reasons People Leave Organized Religion*. I have seen many such articles but this one caught my attention. So, I decided to use some of the real life stories in my sermons. I may or may not use all of reasons and I might find some others. Each reason is a legitimate reason. However, each person that was offended gave up on organized religion instead of fixing the respective broken religious system. Each one of the reasons is about what someone else did to another person. However, our relationship with the Lord is never about what someone else did or said. God reaches out to each one of us. Our relationship is personal. It is never about someone else. It is about our own relationship. It is about the individual self and the Lord. The following is one of the cited reasons.

I was living in poverty and raising two kids. I took them to church until the priest came to my roach-ridden, barely furnished apartment with my check in his hand to tell me that my \$10 couldn't support the church and that I needed to increase it at least five-fold or fined a different church. He left my check. We left the church and never went to another one.

This reminded me of Readers Digest articles titled *Laughter in the United States*. It is sad but true and so unusual it strikes a nerve of humor. There are two parties involved in the story, the poor protagonist and a priest. Before we judge the priest we need to understand that we do not have all of the details. We do not know the background

behind the motivation. We do not know if his action is due to the priest or if it is initiated by the congregation. There could be some antiquated policy or expectation. Regardless, there is a distinct lack of compassion for the underprivileged. They are doing the opposite of what they should be doing. They are expecting more from the poor for the sake of the institution when the institution should be reaching out to help the poor.

The poor protagonist went to church and took her two children to church with her until this event. She was active until then. This calls into question the degree of her faithfulness. It was actually the event itself and her weakness of faith that caused her to stumble. There are some other possible responses to such an offense but she took the easy way out. She quit and dropped out of religious life all together. This is the easiest option and the most frequent response when someone is hurt within the realm of religion. She blamed the priest, the church, and all of organized religion. She could have taken the check back with humility and pledge to give more. She could be passive aggressive and keep going but not give anything at all. She could go to another church or denomination that is more suitable and puts people first instead of finances of the institution first. She could have become an advocate for change. She could see the problem that exists within the life of that particular ministry and fix it.

There is always competition in every aspect of life. There is always give and take. There are always misunderstandings and hurt feelings whether it is within the dynamics of family, work, friendships, or church because there is always human relations. Neither party would have responded the way they did if they took the time to study what Jesus said and did. Neither party did that what both parties should have. The poor protagonist had a negative emotional reaction to a negative event in her life. She allowed the action of another to become a wedge in her relationship with Lord. Her response was to give up on all religion when only one person from one church offended her. The contemporary lesson has two principles. The obvious one is to make sure we are not stumbling blocks for others. We should also make sure that we follow Jesus so that whenever we encounter a stumbling block, it does not derail us from a life of faith.