

# Abusive Religion: Who Do You Love?

I'm going to begin with a statement today that is sad to have to address. Some of you are going to say, "I knew it!" Others of you are going to have your innocent view of the church shattered and think there's no way this could be. Here's the statement: *People use religion to manipulate others.*

They always have and I'm guessing they always will, at least until Jesus comes back. Of course, everyone doesn't do it. Jesus certainly didn't do it. The problem is sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference between those with a pure, sincere heart for Jesus and those who only have their own self-interest at heart. There are Christian bands and singing groups that claim to be doing what they're doing for Jesus and they really just want to be rock stars. They act like it's all for Jesus, but the truth is they love the adoration of the crowds. Some of them travel around with outrageous prices for tickets and outrageous demands for their dressing rooms.

Some preachers are no better. We can turn to a religious channel on our TV just about any time and see a man and woman dressed in fine clothes and jewelry sitting at a table telling you that you will receive a blessing when you support their ministry. It certainly seems like a scam, especially when they promise you that you will receive 100 fold in return. It all appears as legitimate as Bernie Madhoff's Ponzi Scheme.

All across the country, normal everyday pastors like me aren't immune. Some pastors can be accused of just moving up the ladder to bigger and better churches with bigger and better budgets.

In his book *Exiles*, Michael Frost says that too many clergy don't even believe what they preach anymore. But they're trapped in their job and their finances dictate that they keep hopelessly preaching to those who just want a social club that poses for the church.

And lest you think it's just the preachers who abuse religion, the truth is we as individual religious people often try to manipulate God and each other. We do good deeds trying to earn favor with God. And we like for others to see our good deeds so they will be impressed with us. We'd sometimes rather do things for people who can pay us back than doing things for people who can do nothing for us.

And lost in all of this greed and yearning for attention and favor that calls itself religion is the person truly trying to follow God, to loyally live like she trusts God to take care of her, and she doesn't seek the approval of anyone else, just God.

Before us this morning we have two examples. One of pride and self-importance and abuse of others, and the other of lowliness and self-sacrifice. One exemplifies corrupt religion and the other shows the example of a kingdom citizen. One demonstrates love for self, the other love for God.

Follow along with me as I read 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."**

In these seven verses Jesus was pointing out to us two possible ways for us to live.

### **1. The Scribes - Those Who Love Themselves.**

Starting in verse 38 Jesus gives a scathing attack against the scribes. The scribes were the "doctors of the Law". They read, copied and interpreted the Law for the Jewish people. They were considered the authorities in what the Law taught. In a sense, they were religious celebrities.

Consider the Lord's description of these men.

**They love to go in long clothing** – The scribes were known by the long, white robes they wore. These robes had long fringe around the hem that made them stand out from the common man. The scribes in their long, flowing, white robes certainly stood out. The fringe gave them the illusion that they were gliding about instead of walking.

**They love greetings in the marketplace** – When the scribes passed by, everyone stood up out of respect. The only people who were not required to stand were the tradesmen who were involved in their work. The scribes expected people to call them things like "Rabbi", "Master", "Father", or even "exalted one", as they walked past.

**They love the chief seats in the synagogue** – The chief seat in the synagogue was a bench that sat in front of the chest containing the scrolls of the Torah. The scribes were seated here so that they would be seen as being near the Law to guard it. From this bench, the scribes could be seen by everyone in the synagogue.

**They love the best places at feasts** – The scribes were the "A"-List celebrities of the day and having them there would draw a crowd to your party. When the scribes arrived, they were given seats next to the host. They occupied the place of high honor.

**They devour widows houses** – Scribes often served as “estate planners”. They would write out legal documents for illiterate widows. Some were guilty of convincing poor widows that they would be serving God by supporting the Temple, or by supporting the scribe himself. When this happened, the scribe profited and whatever the husband left for his wife was taken away through extortion.

**They make a show of their religious activities** – The scribes loved to stand in public and pray long, loud, elaborate, wordy prayers that they hoped would impress the uneducated common people. Jesus spoke of this behavior in Matt. 6:5-6,

**"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."**

**These will receive greater condemnation** – These men were nothing but religious hypocrites and they will face God Almighty in judgment someday. In Matthew's account of Jesus' teaching here in the temple He goes on to pronounce seven scathing WOES upon these religious leaders for their hypocrisy, their false religion. Finally in Matthew 23:33 Jesus says to them, **"Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?"**

Can you imagine Jesus standing in the temple and this is what He's saying to them? And they already hate Him with a passion and want Him dead. And He does this because it's true and it's merciful to warn them and it's merciful to warn the people.

The application is not just for religious leaders, its for all of us. On the one hand, Jesus saw self-righteous, self-important, self-serving people. People doing religious things only to benefit themselves. They would appear to glorify God if it was in their own self-interest. Everything was about them. It was never about others and most assuredly never about God. They invest in themselves, their confidence is in themselves, they are made worthy in their own eyes by their own actions.

Those who receive the greatest condemnation from Jesus are those who abuse religion to manipulate others for their own greed and advancement. These men do not love God or love people. They love themselves.

Then, there's another option, another way to live.

## **2. The Widow - Those Who Love God.**

When Jesus finished teaching the people, He took a seat near the “treasury”. This area was in the “Court of the Women” and was an area set aside for giving. The treasury consisted of thirteen receptacles where people could make their contributions. These receptacles were shaped like inverted trumpets, with a large end at the top and a small end at the bottom. Each of these trumpets was labeled as to what the offerings placed in it were to be used for. Nine of the trumpets were for various dues related the Law. The other four were for voluntary offerings

of various natures. People gave by approaching the trumpets and dropping in their offerings.

As Jesus sat there, He watched the people bringing their gifts, and He watched how they gave those gifts. The word “beheld” means “to view attentively; to perceive”. Jesus saw what they were doing with His eyes and He saw the motive of their hearts as they gave.

Some came in with great fanfare, standing back and tossing in their gift for the greatest effect. Others gave with a frown on their face, holding onto their coins as tightly as they could to the very last second. Others probably stopped to make sure that everyone was watching them as they gave their offerings.

Matt. 6:1-4 describes some of the excesses that marked the Jews and their giving in Jesus’ day. Some would hire trumpeters to go before them so that attention would be drawn to them and their giving. They would come to the treasury and make a great show of casting in their money. As their money fell into the trumpet, it would make a great noise. Heads would turn and people would stare in admiration at these people who gave great sums of money to the Temple.

Imagine the scene as the trumpets blared, the applause rose and fell and the sound of coins echoed throughout the Temple.

Most of these people were not giving for the glory of God; they were giving for the praise of men. According to Jesus, when they received the praise of others, they got all they were going to get, Matt. 6:2. They did not love God, they loved themselves.

This was the real heartbeat of false religion. Mark it, when you see people telling you that if you send them your money, God will bless you...that’s the heartbeat of a false teacher. False leaders are moved by greed. The Pharisees and scribes, Jesus said in Luke 16:14, were lovers of money.

The massive amount of money that was represented in the temple, stored in the temple, and currently being put into the offering boxes was staggering and stands in sharp contrast to the smallness of the widow's offering.

As Jesus watched the rich people coming and going, giving their money with fanfare and excitement, He saw a poor widow enter the treasury. As Jesus watched this poor, humble woman gave her gift. The people shouted and applauded for the rich people and their large gifts. No one noticed this widow. No one, that is, but the only One that matters!

In fact, the entire story stands in contrast to the scribes and their way of life. Here this widow, loving God with all she has, stands in contrast to the self-serving, self-promoting scribes.

Jesus summoned his disciples to himself. This was something that he didn't want to pass by their attention. Having summoned them to himself, He spoke solemnly to them. **"Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury."**

The evidence of her love is seen in the fact that she even gave at all. She was a poor widow. Widows were the poorest of the poor in that society. There was no Social Security. There was no welfare. Widows lived hand to mouth.

Here is a widow who comes into the presence of God to give to Him. She doesn't have much. "Two mites" translates the word "lepton", which means "the thin one". Scholars are divided over how much these coins were worth, but it was a mere fraction of an average day's pay.

It was a gift that amounted to nothing of any value, as far as money was concerned. When she dropped her two little coins in that trumpet, they made no noise at all among the clamor of the people and clanging of the gifts of the rich.

Why would she bother to give such an insignificant gift? Her two cents among the thousands of dollars given by the wealthy seems so small. Why bother? This little lady is everything the religious scribes and the rich hypocrites were not. She was a living, breathing illustration of Mark 12:29-31.

Jesus saw her giving and He said, **"Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood."** Jesus commended her giving because she gave everything she had! She could have kept one of those coins for herself, but she willingly gave everything she had to Jesus. Everything that poor woman had earned for her own needs was given willingly to the Lord.

The rich people gave that day to be acknowledged by men. They were, and they received their reward. That widow gave because she loved God. When she gave, there were no trumpet blasts. There were no ooh's and aah's from the crowd. There was no applause. But, I am almost sure that Jesus was standing up on the inside applauding her. I am almost sure that God in Heaven was nodding His Divine approval over her give of love. One day, she will stand in His presence and she will be rewarded for her faith. On that day she will be publicly acknowledged, commended and rewarded by God Almighty!

But in a sense, this widow is not so much to be seen as a positive example, but rather as a living representative of a crying shame. She represents the on-going exploitation of the poor by the ruling elites. It is them whom Jesus attacks here.

Jesus surely loves the poor widow, maybe even what she does, but He definitely did not approve of the social conditions and the religious abuses that created her poverty.

These scribes should have known the commandments of their God:

**"You shall not deprive a stranger or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this."** (Deut. 24:17-18)

**Cursed is the one who perverts the justice due the stranger, the fatherless, and widow.** (Deut. 27:19).

Yet the scribes in our story transgress and forget that. They pervert justice! The religious and political leaders' charge was to protect, defend, and support the widow and orphan, not rob them blind. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had failed to relate to the law's dictates that widows were not only not required to give to the temple at all, but, in fact, they were to be sustained by the generosity of others.

The scribes were caught up with walking around in long robes, commanding respect in the marketplaces, taking the best seats in synagogues and at parties, and saying long prayers for show, and forgot the first commandment, which is not love of self, but love of God. These scribes missed the first commandment--to love the Lord your God, so they missed the second as well--love your neighbor.

The real point of this story has nothing to do with giving. The real point of this story has everything to do with the attitude of the heart. The real point of this story is the contrast between the hypocritical scribe and this humble widow.

The religious and the rich folks in these verses loved themselves. They did what they did to be seen of men. They were motivated in all they did by the twin evils of pride and self-love.

The widow, on the other hand, gave all she had with seemingly no earthly reward. Because of her devotion, her gift lives on.

Jesus said that the rich give out of their abundance, and this poor widow gave out of her poverty. And she gave everything she had. And 2,000 years later Jesus has made her an example to us. Not necessarily in the way I might use this Scripture so that you will give more money to benefit the church. But so that you would give everything to Jesus.

If you find this church worthy and believe in it's mission, then by all means, I believe you're called to support it financially, I'm called to support it financially; and with our time; and with our talents; and with our prayers; and with our witness; and with our faithful presence – with EVERYTHING. And if you don't believe this church is doing the work of Jesus and you don't think you should support it in all these ways, I pray that you will do some soul searching. I think we need to ask, "Lord, is it me or is it this church?" Is this church the poser or am I?

The question that you face today is this: Who do you really love? Do you do what you do because you are in love with Jesus? Or, do you do what you do because you are in love with yourself?

Has God spoken to your heart about who you love?

If you have seen that you are in love with self, and you feel a pull to fall in love with the Savior, I invite you to come.

If He has spoken to you about your giving, come to Him and talk to Him about it.

If you want to give Him the greatest gift of all, come and give Him yourself in renewed love and devotion today.