

Contrasting Worship

Luke 20:45-21:4

Introduction

Fleecing the Flock:

- Televangelist Jim Bakker ran *Praise the Lord Ministry* (PTL) in the 1980s, alongside his wife Tammy Faye and her makeup that could survive a hurricane. At the height of their popularity, they decided to build a massive Christian theme park and resort called *Heritage USA*. To fund it they sold “lifetime partnerships” for thousands of dollars, promising free lodging every year for life at the resort. **The math wasn’t mathing.** Bakker sold far more memberships than there were rooms. Tens of thousands of people, often retirees, widows, and low-income Christians, paid, trusting this was a God-honoring ministry. Almost all of them never received what they were promised.
- It wasn’t just a pyramid scheme; it was a *scam*. Investigations revealed that donor funds were used to support an extravagant lifestyle: luxury homes, expensive cars, lavish vacations.
- They used religious language and their trusted position of spiritual authority to prey on sincere believers and vulnerable donors for personal enrichment.
- To use Jesus’ words: “They devour[ed] widows’ houses.”
- Unbelievably, he’s back on TV, using the same playbook peddling snake-oil cures and survival products.¹
- Jesus warned about this very type of thing, because the dangers of the first century exist in the 21st.
- There is always a temptation to use God to enrich ourselves rather than love God above all else. Maybe more subtle than Jim and Tammy Faye, but no less damaging to your soul.

Theology and Practice: The context of Luke 20 has been the opposition of the religious leaders to Jesus.

- They have questioned his **identity** as the promised messiah and his **authority** over God’s people. They have tried to argue with him about **theology** and **politics**, and at each step, he silences their challenges.
- But these are not just esoteric theological discussions. Their theological mistakes are proven by their sinful behavior. **Why?** Because when you put yourself at the center of your theology, you end up living as the final authority.
- A humble relationship to the knowledge of God leads to humble obedience to God. But a prideful posture toward God always produces a life that puts others down in order to lift yourself up.

¹ One time, a televangelist with the name Creflo Dollar (a little on the nose) asked his congregation to crowdfund a \$65 million private jet so “he could spread the gospel” (because apparently you can’t spread the gospel from economy class — look, they need Jesus in the Bahamas too).

Posture of Worship: Not everything is a simple binary (most things are a spectrum), but sometimes Scripture gives us a binary not to oversimplify reality, but to bring clarity and help stop us from fooling ourselves.

- This simple, either-or comparison is meant to force us to examine how we approach God.

Jesus exposes the heart behind worship.

- (1) False Worship Uses God to Exalt Self (20:45–47)
- (2) True Worship Gives Self to Exalt God (21:1–4)

^{20:45} And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, ⁴⁶ “Beware of the scribes, who 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, ⁴⁷ who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” ^{21:1} Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, ² and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³ And he said, “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. ⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

1. False Worship Uses God to Exalt Self (20:45–47)

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Listen In: ^{20:45} And in the hearing of all the people, he said to his disciples,

- Jesus gathers his disciples around, knowing that the crowds *and probably the religious leaders* are listening.
 - Sort of makes me think of a church gathering. We call our members' meetings “family meetings” (though anyone is welcome to attend). In reality, every gathering of Redemption Heights Church is a family meeting. But it is an intentionally *open* family meeting where we hope and expect others to “listen in.”
 - The church gathering is *for* the family, but *open* to everyone.
 - We want *everyone* to hear the gospel, *but we also want them to see the kind of community the gospel creates* (e.g., a people shaped by grace, a family marked by humility, a church controlled by the love of Christ). The gathered church doesn't just *proclaim* the gospel; it puts the gospel on display.

Beware: ⁴⁶ “Beware of the scribes,

- The scribes are often mentioned alongside the Pharisees, experts in the law, and other religious leaders of Jesus day.²

² Φαρισαῖοι, γραμματεῖς, νομικοί: Lk 5:17, 21; Mk 7:1, 5; Matt 23:2; Ezra 7:6; Lk 11:45-52; Lk 7:30; Matt 22:35

- They were responsible for knowing, transmitting, and teaching the Hebrew Bible.³ They were the Biblical and theological experts of the day.
- Immediately preceding this section, they've been in a bit of a Bible debate with Jesus,⁴ and he takes them to the Scriptural woodshed.⁵ *These sections are very closely connected.
- Jesus is not shy about warning people of false teachers. He says: **Beware** of the scribes.
 - **Beware** = Be careful, watch out, *be wary of*. It's a *warning*.
 - We see all sorts of **warnings** in Scripture: **be wary about...**
 - Flaunting righteous behavior (Matt 6:1)
 - False prophets (Matt 7:15)
 - Covetousness (Lk 12:15)
 - Your own sin... yourself (Lk 17:3)
- Too often, Jesus tells us to be wary of something and we casually stroll toward it.
 - The story of the explosive eruption of Mount St. Helens in Skamania County, Washington, on May 18, 1980, introduced me to an intriguing celebrity: the curmudgeonly and irascible caretaker of the Mount St. Helens Lodge, Harry R. Truman (no relation to President Harry S. Truman). With a script-worthy life, a 10-dollar name, and an audacious personality, 83-year-old Truman had lived near the mountain for decades. When scientists **warned** him to evacuate (**beware!**), he refused to leave. He figured he'd lived there too long and nothing had ever happened. When it erupted, he was killed instantly, buried under 150 feet of volcanic debris and pyroclastic flow.
- Warnings are an act of love.
 - When Jesus warns us about **greed**, and we build our lives on making as much money as possible, our love shifts from God to stuff.⁶
 - When we are told not to be **unequally yoked**, and we date an unbeliever, we sow seeds of compromise in our faith.⁷
 - When we are told to love the **glory that comes from God and not from man**, but we seek the approval of others, we compromise our worship.⁸

Listen to the warnings of Jesus. You *don't* have to learn the hard way. Here, he warns them of the false worship of the scribes.

Symptoms of Self: What are the symptoms of their self-absorbed worship?

- **(1) Appearance:** who like⁹ to walk around in long robes,

³ Including copying and transmitting.

⁴ About the most quoted OT passage in the NT (Ps 110).

⁵ Cf. Lk 20:39-44

⁶ Lk 12:15

⁷ 2 Cor 6:14

⁸ Jn 12:43

⁹ θελόντων

- For the scribes, these robes were fancy status symbols to show people their religious authority and make sure no one missed how pious they were (e.g., fancy suits in the modern megachurch or Harry Potter costumes of RCC).
- “They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long” (Matt 23:5).
 - Phylacteries (boxes with Torah text, strapped to your arm or forehead, like headlamp; people were using them like magic charms, rather than following their meaning). The Bible is not a lucky rabbit’s foot, it is God’s Word meant to be treasured and *obeyed*). charms, not meaning
 - Fringes (*tzitzit*),¹⁰ tassels on the corner of your garment (see them today) meant to *remind* you to obey God’s commands; but they become a *sign* of godliness rather than a reminder to act in accord with godliness.
 - E.g., Big Bible, Instagram quiet time post, Christian t-shirt or bumper sticker, etc.
- (2) Recognition: and love¹¹ greetings in the marketplaces
 - ⁷ [They love] greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matt 23:1-12)
 - It is fine and probably *good* to call someone by an honorific title. But when they *demand* it (or worse, love it), that’s a major problem.
 - Our hearts shouldn’t love it.
 - We should have different values in the church. No special titles here (it’s great if you “call” me pastor, but I will not “demand” it). Cf. Dave Black not as Dr. Black and not requiring attendance in class. When you’re secure in who you are in Christ, you don’t need some arbitrary title to validate it. The people who demand to be called “Dr.” the most are the honorary doctorates (unearned).¹²
 - They often use these things to feel good about themselves and bully people into submission.
 - I’ve been around too many Christian cultures that love self-aggrandizing titles. Actual titles I’ve seen *in real life*:
 - Chief Apostle (as if apostle isn’t audacious enough)
 - Archbishop (can’t just be the bishop, need to be the *most* bishop)
 - Senior Visionary Catalyst (leadership jargon soup)
 - God’s Anointed Queen of the South (on a legit parking spot)
 - When God has the ultimate place in our lives, we don’t seek the glory for ourselves (e.g., revival even if it comes from another church).

¹⁰ Num 15:37-41 תִּצִיֵז

¹¹ φιλοῦντων

¹² E.g., Zacharius, Lorritts, etc.

- **(3) Position:** and the best seats¹³ in the synagogues and the places of honor¹⁴ at feasts, E.g., prominent seats, seats of honor, the prime location.
 - E.g., pastors on stage, green rooms, premier parking spaces.
 - KBC growing up, minister of music dad on stage, two services, two envelopes because it matters more to *look* righteous than to be righteous.
 - If pastors are to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:3), then that should include humility (cf. 1 Pet 5:5).
- **(4) Exploitation:** ⁴⁷ who devour widows’ houses How can a true shepherd sleep at night if, at the end of his ministry, he is wealthy and his sheep are destitute? Cf. Mrs. Sementelli light bill for grandchildren vs. tithe.
 - There are documented examples: pastor berating a widow when she donates \$1200 rather than \$2000,¹⁵ or another locking the church doors until \$40,000 shows up in the offering plate.¹⁶
 - Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (Jas 1:27).
 - How you treat those who *can’t* give tells me infinitely more than how you treat those who can.
- **(5) Performance:** and for a pretense make long prayers. They are praying long prayers but are missing the purpose of prayer. **They are praying to look godly rather than praying to know God.**
 - They demonstrate “the appearance of piety but are not pious” (Bock). They are more concerned about *what* people think about them than the reality of who they are (e.g., looking godly, rather than being godly; show muscles vs. go muscles).
 - Long prayers are not more holy. The best prayers are simple and sincere.
 - “Lord, save me” (Matt 14:30, Peter).
 - “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lk 18:13, tax collector).
 - Religious activity, familiarity, and skill can be deadly because they can mask genuine dependence on God. It can *look* like living for *God*, when you’re actually living for *self*.
- When God has the ultimate place in our lives, we don’t seek glory for ourselves

Greater Judgment: They will receive the greater condemnation.”¹⁷

- **Why would their judgment be greater?** Because the closer you are to holy things, the more serious it is to misuse them.
 - Of all people, those who study the Scriptures should know better.
 - They have the answer in front of them, but are using it for their own benefit rather than for God’s glory.

¹³ πρωτοκαθεδρίας (*primas cathedras*); cf. Matt 23:6

¹⁴ πρωτοκλισίας

¹⁵ Bishop Marvin Winans

¹⁶ Marvin Sapp

¹⁷ οὔτοι λήμψονται περισσότερον κρίμα; cf. Jas 3:1 and Rom 13:2 for “greater judgment” language.

- This is why: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (Jas 3:1).
- Jesus is gentle with repentant sinners but harsh with pretenders.
- Jesus deals compassionately with sinners who realize they’re sinners, but harshly with sinners who pretend they are not sinners.

Heart Posture: All of these are symptoms of someone who uses God to exalt themselves.

- Do I exist for God, or does God exist for me?
- Does my heart delight in receiving honor from others or from God?
- Do I feel better when I have more power or a higher position?
- Do I compare myself against others more than God?

🚩 How you look matters more than who you are.

🚩 Crave recognition.

🚩 Spiritual activity becomes a way to impress people.

It’s shockingly easy to drift into the thinking that God exists to serve me instead of the other way around. But there is another and better way. False worship takes; true worship gives.

2. True Worship Gives Self to Exalt God (21:1–4)

^{21:1} Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, ² and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³ And he said, “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. ⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

Rich Giving: ^{21:1} Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box,¹⁸

- These offering boxes¹⁹ were in a publicly accessible part of the temple²⁰ and received *freewill offerings* from people to pay for various temple expenses not *explicitly* covered in the prescribed tithes.
 - E.g., someone has to pay for the A/C; someone has to buy the wood for the offerings, repair the building when it breaks, etc.
- The Lucan version is more condensed than Mark²¹ where he mentions them putting in “large sums.” Luke simply calls them “the rich.” Maybe you could tell by their Gucci sandals or Louis Vuitton robes.
 - When money is measured in coinage, in the *weight* of metal, it’s hard to hide. Señor Moneybags is dragging sacks of coins into the temple treasury, dropping them into the coffers like a CoinStar machine (cha ching cha ching cha ching).

Poor Giving: ² and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.

¹⁸ The Lucan version is more condensed than Mark (cf. Mk 12:41)

¹⁹ 13 trumpet-shaped receptacles (cf. Mishnah, Neh 12:44, Josephus, etc.)

²⁰ Court of Women

²¹ Cf. Mk 12:41

- The comparison couldn't be more stark.
- There are *many* rich (the rich), but there is only *a* poor widow (one).
- This poor widow puts in two (what the Greek calls) *lepta*.²² A *lepton*²³ was the smallest coin in circulation in Judea. It was usually made of copper²⁴ (think penny). Its worth has been calculated as 1/128 of a denarius (which is one day's wages). So she put in *two lepta* = 1/64 of a day's wages.²⁵
- In fact, the adjective "poor"²⁶ is not the general Greek word for poor.²⁷ This word means "extremely poor, destitute, living hand-to-mouth, or barely surviving."

Jesus saw the rich, and he saw the poor widow. God doesn't miss a thing. He sees. But he doesn't just see your public persona, he sees your private devotion. Beyond that, he sees your heart, your motivation, your trust.

- His spiritual vision is like an MRI to your soul, seeing what no one else can. And his diagnosis is piercing.

Divine Economics: ³ And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them.

- Here's the truth!²⁸ The widow's pennies are *worth more* than the wealthy's millions!
- God's economy functions differently.
- This is actually *not* primarily a sermon about money. Money is the indicator, this sermon is about the heart.
- God doesn't need your money.
- We judge based on quantity, God judges based on quality.
 - The wealthy look at the number of zeros contributed.
 - The religious look at the number of words prayed.
 - The self-righteous look at the number of rules kept.
- God looks at the attitude of sincere devotion, the sacrifice of complete trust, and the true object of our heart's worship.

Sacrifice: ⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

- Their gift was large in quantity but insignificant in their lives. They gave from their extra, she gave from her essential. Their gift was a *tax write off*, hers meant going hungry. She was going to have to depend on God to provide, this decision impacted her life.
 - There are real people worth more than \$100 billion (e.g., Larry Ellison, Warren Buffet, etc.). If one of them gave a \$1 million gift, it would be .001% of their worth. That's equivalent to someone worth \$100,000 giving \$1 (or \$60,000 giving 60¢).

²² ΛΕΠΤΑ ΔΥΟ

²³ ΛΕΠΤΟΝ

²⁴ Sometimes bronze

²⁵ If a modern worker makes between \$128-\$160/day then this would be between \$2 and \$2.50

²⁶ ΠΕΝΙΧΡΑΝ; *hapax legomenon*

²⁷ ΠΤΩΧΟΣ

²⁸ Ἀληθῶς

- But what if your \$40 to your name and it needs to get you through this week and you put \$5 in the offering. That's a big deal. That hurts. That's a risk!
- The size of the gift is not indicative of the sacrifice (in fact it might be deceptive).
- God isn't telling the rich not to give (*please!*) or that large gifts are bad, but *sacrifice is measured by what it costs you, not what it sounds like to others.*
- I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom 12:1).
 - Do worship God from excess or sacrifice? When it comes to breakfast, the chicken makes a contribution, the pig makes a sacrifice.
- ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (Matt 16:24-26).
 - "A sacrificial life is the means, and the only means, by which a life of faith matures" (Peterson).
 - "Sacrifice exposes spiritual fantasy as a masquerade of faith" (Peterson).
- Do you give God your leftovers, or your essentials?
 - In Mark's telling of this story he say "she put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (Mk 12:44). A literal translation could be something like: "she cast in her whole life."²⁹ This is worship.

Conclusion

The scribes were worshipping God to enhance their own reputation. They were performing for the crowd to bolster their own position. **Their worship was about them.**

- The widow was worshipping with all of her life and no one but God saw or cared—and that's *more than enough*.

Examine your heart of worship.

- Is your worship sincere, sacrificial, and fully surrendered?
- Or are you worshipping to look good in front of others?
- Are you worshipping to get God to bless you?
- Are you worshipping God or are you using God?

²⁹ ὅσα εἶχεν ἔβαλεν ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς