

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus' Hard Path That Leads to Gospel For Us

The Beauty of Extravagant Generosity

(Luke 20:1--21:4)

Study #2

Introduction: The biggest news in town...

You and I have lived in a 24/7 culture of non-stop news for years now. The newsmakers are the movers and shakers of finance and politics, cultural icons, influencers, and sports heroes.

News is so pervasive that you have to try hard to escape the glut of news. It's also hard to escape the impression that the actions of prominent newsmakers are the biggest stories of the day. They are not.

Behind the often discouraging headlines and breaking stories are less glamorous stories that are more core to God's bigger story than anything out of Washington D.C. or Hollywood or (thinking of the NCAA's Final Four) San Antonio.

God's work in broken people and in broken places is the biggest new of the day.

Over the next few minutes, we'll see from interactions Jesus had on the final Tuesday of His life that the usual newsmakers weren't anything to write home about.

The real newsmaker, the one who modelled God's ways, who has pointed Jesus-followers in how to live for centuries, and who towered over the movers and shakers, lived in the shadows.

In these weeks leading up to Easter, we're walking through Jesus' final days. The events we'll see today all occurred on His final Tuesday. It was a long and challenging day, as we'll see.

Three Ugly, Failed Attempts to "Get" Jesus (Luke 20:1-40)

A. Jewish Leaders Confronted Jesus (20:1-8)

Who gave You the right? (vv. 1-2)

[20:1] On one of the days while He was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders confronted Him.

These confronters - ***"the chief priests and the scribes with the elders"*** - were probably members of the Jewish Sanhedrin, which was the major decision-making body of Israel in Jesus' day.

These are fellow Jews with Jesus. They share a Jewish heritage with Jesus. But they are upset with Jesus. They had a question for Him. It was an accusing question.

[20: 2] and they declared, saying to Him, "Tell us by what authority You are doing these things, or who is the one who gave You this authority?"

Over the course of His three year career Jesus had been busy teaching and preaching and healing and casting out demons. More recently, He had been busy borrowing donkeys, receiving the worship of adoring crowds, and cleaning up the temple's messes.

It was these last ***"these things"*** that had the rulers upset. Jesus was acting like He owned the place. They wonder, ***"Who made You 'Boss,' anyway?"***

Jesus heard their question, but He didn't answer. He responded to their question with a question.

Answering a question with a question (vv. 3-4)

[3] But He replied to them, “I will also ask you a question, and you tell Me: [4] Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?”

Before John the Baptist was put to death by Herod, he had been a powerful - and polarizing - force. He was all about God, holiness, and repentance. Jesus’ question to the rulers placed John on center stage.

By their question they meant to put Jesus on the spot. By His question to them, He has put them on the spot. We get to listen in on their internal private “chat” as they decide what to say back to Jesus.

Impaled on the horns of a dilemma (vv. 31-33a)

On the one hand, “[5]...‘If we say, “From heaven,” He will say, “Why did you not believe him?”’ and we’ll just open ourselves up to being ridiculed because we never accepted John’s message.”

On the other hand, “If we say, [6] say, ‘From men,’ all the people will stone us to death, since they are convinced that John was a prophet.”

They’ve thought up the only two answers they could possibly give and have found them both unacceptable. So, they responded to Jesus’ question with a dishonest and cowardly, “We do not know.”

The truth was they just didn’t know how to answer without looking silly. Jesus’ response was neither cowardly nor deceitful.

Checkmate, stalemate (v. 8)

[8] And Jesus said to them, “Neither am I telling you by what authority I do these things.”

He flatly refused to answer their question. Jesus was perfectly comfortable not answering their question.¹ Interview ended.

So, Jesus wisely navigated His way through this confrontation. But I have to believe that He was deeply disappointed that these fellow Jews, religious leaders, at that, were so thoroughly opposed to Him.

I say that because right after that confrontation, Jesus told a parable. The point of the parable was to slam the religious rulers for their rejection of Him. (The parable of the vine-growers; Luke 20:9-18)

That parable infuriated these leaders. Now, they really wanted to get rid of Jesus. But they couldn’t attack Him because they feared the people, who, at this point, were wildly enthusiastic about Jesus. (v. 19)

[20] And so they watched Him closely, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, in order that they might catch Him in some statement,² so that they could hand Him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor.

Here is the question from the spies.

Jewish Leaders Try to Entrap Jesus (20:19-26)

A taxing question (vv. 21-22)

[21] And the spies questioned Him, saying, “Teacher, we know that You speak and teach correctly, and You are not partial to anyone, but You teach the way of God on the basis of truth.”

These spies laid it on thick, complimented Jesus, buttered Him up. Then, the question: **[22] Is it permissible for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”**

¹ Jesus was actually being loving by not answering. These leaders had already rejected clear claims that He had been given authority by God to do what He did. To have answered directly would have just increased their guilt for rejecting.

² “Trap” = in the original language, this is a word used of wild animal traps.

As subject people, the Jews were forced to pay tax to Rome. Not surprisingly, paying taxes to Rome irritated the Jews.³

The spies sent by the **“chief priests and scribes”** wanted to trap Jesus in a can’t win situation by asking if it was **“permissible”** for a God-fearing Jew to pay taxes to Caesar. Not so much **“Should we?”** and more **“Is it allowable? Would we be sinning if we did?”**

So, Jesus would become unpopular with the average Jew if He just said, **“Pay the tax.”** (Many citizens aren’t thrilled to pay taxes...) But if He said, **“Don’t pay the tax,”** He’d be in big trouble with Rome.

We think, **“Poor Jesus. He can’t win this time. They’ve got Him.”**

Not so fast. Once again, Jesus wins. And He wins by keeping the main thing the main thing.

The “image” issue... (vv. 23-25)

[23] But He saw through their trickery and said to them, [24a] “Show Me a denarius.

They would have brought to Him a common coin. The denarius was the Roman coin used to pay the tax in question.⁴

Looking at the coin and then at the crowd that had gathered, Jesus tossed out a question.

[24b] “...Whose image and inscription does it have?”

Obviously, it was Caesar’s image, and the rulers said so.

Then Jesus spoke again. And what He said addressed the concerns of the rulers AND sidestepped the trap they had laid for Him.

[25] And He said to them, “Then pay to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

In other words, people who use Caesar’s money, benefit from his government’s services, and appreciate the order Rome provides, owe Caesar. So, give him his due. Pay his taxes.

The bigger point, though, is that we - all people - are God’s coinage. We bear God’s image and likeness. And if Caesar is deserving of tax revenue, then God is infinitely more deserving of the allegiance and worship of those who bear His image.

Amazing amazement (v. 26)

[26] And they were unable to catch Him in a statement in the presence of the people; and they were amazed at His answer, and said nothing.

Us? We’re simply amazed that they were amazed. I mean, what did they expect?

First, He had quickly dispatched the one group by posing a question they wouldn’t answer. They should have known that He would see through their hypocrisy and would win, again.

And He did. But, again, this has to be discouraging.

I know. Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah. So, I certainly don’t know how He processed all the things that came His way.

But He was also totally human. And in the Gospels, we read of lots of times when Jesus responded very humanly to life. He got hungry and exhausted and deeply sad and angry and put out.

He experienced all of the emotions common to people like us. That’s why I think we can be pretty sure that He was discouraged at this second attack on Tuesday.

³ The “tax” in view here was based on a census, referring to the annual poll tax (head tax) demanded by the Roman emperor from Jews since A.D. 6 when Judea became a Roman province. The money went directly into the emperor’s treasury.

⁴ A denarius is typically defined as the daily wage of a common laborer.

The troubling trend continued. What we'll see next is a set-up from a third set of people committed to entrapment. This group is made up of Sadducees.

The Sadducees, like the chief and the scribes (and Pharisees) were a prominent group of religious leaders in first century Israel. They were religious aristocrats and political animals.

Among the distinctives of the Sadducees were their beliefs that
 (1). only the five books of Moses were authoritative Scripture.
 (2) there were no angels or other spirit beings besides God.
 (3) there was no future judgment or life after this life is over.

In fact, they considered it silly to believe in life after this life. So, to entrap Jesus they set up a complex scenario involving what is known as *levirate* marriage to expose Jesus' silly belief in an afterlife.

A levirate marriage took place when a married man who had no children died. His living brother would father children by his brother's widow, thus keeping his brother's family line and inheritance intact.

Here is the scenario the Sadducees placed before Jesus.

Sadducees Put Jesus to the Test (20:27-40)

A story to show the silliness of life after death - NOT! (vv. 27-33)

[27] Now some of the Sadducees (who maintain that there is no resurrection) came to Him, [28] and they questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife, and he is childless, that his brother is to marry the wife and raise up children for his brother. [29] So then, there were seven brothers; and the first took a wife and died childless; [30] and the second [31] and the third married her; and in the same way all seven died, leaving no children. [32] Finally the woman also died. [33] Therefore, in the resurrection, which one's wife does the woman become? For all seven married her."

Obviously, their scenario was intended to ridicule belief in resurrection life. The Sadducees have Jesus right where they want Him! He's stuck for sure this time.

Now, this will be hard, but try to put yourself in Jesus' sandals.

He has come from eternity and knows, full well and firsthand, that angels are real and that there is life for people after this life is over. He knows - really knows - that the Sadducees are (if I can say this) dead wrong.

Telling Jesus that there is no life after death would be like someone telling you, who have been to the Grand Canyon, "*No way is there a canyon that deep and wide.*"

It would like you telling someone who used to live in Alaska, "*No way they are the 'northern lights' real!*"

So, Jesus knew what He knew. And He took a different tack in dealing with the Sadducees' attempt at entrapment from what He did with the chief priests and scribes.

Here, He simply, flatly, contradicted them.

The TRUE silliness of not believing God's Word (vv. 34-40)

Jesus gave insight to the afterlife (vv. 34-36)

[34] Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and the women are given in marriage, [35] but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; [36] for they cannot even die anymore, for they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.

The error in the Sadducees' little story consisted of trying to apply an earthly solution to a heavenly setting.

Marriage, it turns out, while a wonderful earthly institution, is not a heavenly institution.

The marriage relationship is a great arrangement for this life and for this world - and I'm a very big fan. But it's not the way things work in the life to come.⁵

God is going to establish a whole new order, then and there. And He is perfectly capable of resolving all apparent complications arising from life as we know it here and now.

Jesus' answer is hard to hear for those (maybe like me and you?) who want to know how it's all going to work out. Rather than give all the details, His counsel was, *"Trust God. He'll handle it."*

And to the larger question about life after this life is over? Jesus answered that from the one part of the Bible that the Sadducees said they loved the best: the books of Moses.

[37] But as for the fact that the dead are raised, even Moses revealed this in the passage about the burning bush,⁶ where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. [38] Now He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to Him."

Jesus rested His whole argument about life on the other side on the tense of a verb in Exodus 3:6.

If Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob no longer existed at the time of Moses (Moses lived some four hundred years after these guys had all died), then Moses would have said, ***"God WAS the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."***

He didn't say that. Moses identified the LORD as ***"the [current] God of Abraham..."*** God was saying that the patriarchs were still very much alive in glory, even though they had died.

The Sadducees were so thoroughly and devastatingly defeated by Jesus that they got nothing. They didn't say anything.

But the scribes (who had been listening in on this discussion) did admit, ***[39] "Teacher, You have spoken well." [40] For they did not have the courage to question Him any longer about anything.***

Round three, and Jesus has won, again.

There were more battles on this final Tuesday than we're going to see this morning.

They include His riddle to the rulers about David's "Son" being greater than David (Luke 20:41-44), and His scolding of the scribes and Pharisees. (recorded at Matthew 23, summarized in Luke 20:45-47)

It was a day of winning. But, again, these were sad wins.

The upshot of all of them was further hardening of the opposition. There is never a hint of repentance. Not one ruler expressed faith in Jesus.

Near the end of the afternoon on that Tuesday Jesus had been thoroughly rejected by the rulers of His nation. It seems reasonable to me to suggest that Jesus was disappointed and discouraged.

Not that He was ready to throw in the towel. But that He was emotionally drained. Spent.

And what we are about to see refreshed Him. It brought a smile to His face and redeemed a really tough day. The next story is a counter-example of the hypocrisy of the rulers.⁷

One Glorious Act By a Whole-Hearted Worshiper (Luke 2:1-4)⁸

⁷ Thanks to Darrell Bock for this observation.

⁸ In A Harmony of the Gospels, A.T. Robertson's masterful chronology of the life of Jesus, this episode involving the poor widow was Jesus' final public appearance and His last showing at the Jerusalem temple. It followed the various challenges from the religious rulers we have seen today as well as His own thorough trashing

⁵ And notice that Jesus got in a little jab about the angels in His answer, too.

⁶ We know it as Exodus 3, but there were no chapter divisions in Jesus' day.

Jesus, Watching the Givers (v. 1)

The layout of the Court of the Women

The activity in this scene occurred in the area of the temple called “The Court of the Women.” There was always activity in this Court because it was in this area that people would bring their offerings for the support of the temple.⁹

As you entered this court you would see thirteen “trumpet chests” lined up against a wall.

Someone coming to the temple to pay his or her tithe or to make a sacrifice (in equivalent monetary value) would walk up to one of the wooden chests and drop coins into a ram’s horn fixed on top of that chest.

The ram’s horn was wide at the top and narrow at the bottom, thus making it easy to toss the money in and impossible to retrieve the money once it passed through the bottom of the horn into the chest.

As you might imagine, this kind of giving made quite a racket, and the more coins, the more racket.¹⁰

Each of these trumpet chests was a receptacle into which a worshipper would toss money. And each chest was labeled for a particular kind of donation.¹¹ You could pay the temple tax, or you could make any one of a number of sacrifice offerings (in money).

of the scribes and Pharisees recorded in Matthew 23. This Tuesday occurrence truly was the high point of what was, otherwise, a very challenging day.

⁹ The Court of the Women was not a place in the temple reserved only for women. It was the part of the temple nearest to the Holy Place to which women were permitted to go, unless they were offering sacrifice.

¹⁰ This led Jesus to refer to this giving as “*sounding the trumpet*.” (Matthew 6:2)

¹¹ So, Alfred Edersheim in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*.

Or you could simply make a “freewill offering” of whatever amount to contribute to the upkeep of the temple and the support of its ministries.¹²

Jesus sat down on a bench nearby to watch men and women toss money into the various rams’ horns.

A very observant Jesus...

[2:1] Now He looked up and saw the wealthy putting their gifts into the temple treasury.

It would have been easy to have guessed, even from a distance, roughly how much money this or that person was tossing into a box.

At least one student of these things suggests that the amount of a gift and the purpose for which it was intended were shouted out by the donor to the priest in charge.¹³

If that is the case, Jesus would have known that this worshiper gave six gold coins as a freewill offering and that worshiper gave a dozen denarii toward a certain sacrifice and that other one gave ten silver pieces to support the poor.

Some of my resources tell me that different kinds of coins made different sounds. You could tell who was tossing in wooden nickels and who was giving gold by the noise it made as it hit the ram’s horn.

He would have seen ordinary Jewish citizens giving what they could, or what they figured they should. He saw wealthy people putting their gifts into the treasury.¹⁴

It is striking that Jesus didn’t offer one comment on what was being given by the wealthy.

¹² Charitable donations for the poor were made separately.

¹³ So, Billerbeck, cited in Lane’s commentary, p. 442, footnote 83.

¹⁴ Liberality and generosity may well have been on the uptick among Jews who were in Jerusalem to observe the Passover.

But as He kept watching, someone did catch His attention. He saw one solitary figure walk up to the treasury boxes. And Luke went out of his way to tell us what she gave.

The One Giver Who Caught Jesus' Eye (v. 2)

[2] And He saw a poor widow putting in two lepta coins.

Not all widows are poor, but this widow was poor. Her poverty was evident by the offering she brought.

We aren't told about her demeanor, but I've got to wonder how she felt as she made her way to the trumpet chests to give what she knew was way less in value than what those around her were giving.

Was she embarrassed to bring what she brought? Did she walk confidently, or did she try to be inconspicuous? We don't know.

The monetary value of her offering was negligible next to the offerings of the wealthy.

Luke tells us that she gave two small copper coins - not silver or gold. They are *lepta* which, together, amounted to, roughly, a penny.

The lepton was the smallest denomination of currency available, like our penny, but with much less buying power.¹⁵

Her gift was small. First century documents tell us that she could not have given less. Literally.

It was not allowed under the Jewish system to give only one lepton. To give anything this widow had to give at least two lepta.

My guess is that nobody in the Court of the Women knew when this woman gave.

The tiny sound of the two light, copper coins dropping was so soft that it would have drawn no attention over the crash of the heavy thud of the silver and gold tossed in by the wealthy.

Plink. Plink.

Then, we can imagine her turning around and walking out. Business continues, as usual, with more worshipers lining up to give. Nobody had paid any attention to the poor widow - except Jesus.

When He saw how this widow gave, He knew that He had finally seen what He had been looking for when He had first come to the temple early on that Tuesday morning.

He hadn't seen it in any of the exchanges with the groups of the religious elite. The failure of the chief priests, scribes, and Sadducees was that they didn't do what the poor widow had done.

What He saw here at the temple's treasury turned His day around. He saw the greatness He had been looking for in the widow's offering and He called His disciples' attention to it.

He started off the way He so often started off when He had some really important point to make.

The Greater Giver (vv. 3-4)

Listen up! This is important!! (v. 3a)

[3] And He said, "Truly I say to you..."

When Jesus says, "***Truly I say to you...***" it is code for "*Hey guys, sit up and take notice! You can't miss this.*" We can't miss this.

He went on to explain what was so remarkable about what she did.

Jesus assessed the value of the poor widow's gift (vv. 3b-4)

¹⁵ In the currency of that day, the coin was worth the value of the metal. The lepton was a very small copper coin, less than a centimeter in diameter.

[3] “...this poor widow put in more than all of them; [4] for they all contributed to the offering from their surplus; but she, from her poverty, put in all that she had to live on.”

Jesus didn’t say that she gave more, “*relatively speaking*.” He said, “**she gave more.**”

Normal arithmetic would have put a gift of two lepta at the bottom, as the least of all the gifts. But, by using Jesus’ arithmetic, the poor widow gave “**more**” than the other givers gave on that day.

Jesus valued giving, not on the basis of the weight of the coin, but on the basis of the heart from which the gift came.

He didn’t value it on the basis of what good it did. Two lepta wouldn’t make much difference to the daily operation of the temple.

He didn’t value her gift based on her having contributed to this or that treasury box.¹⁶

What made her offering stand out as “**more**” than all the other offerings made in the Court of the Women on that Day was its *sacrifice*.

Conclusion:

The movers and shakers of the first-century Jewish world were the chief priests and scribes (and Pharisees) and the Sadducees.

They were noted for their piety. They were esteemed for their knowledge of Scripture. They were honored at banquets.

And they couldn’t hold a candle to the poor widow’s walk with God. She knew what pleased God and what He would reward, and she freely gave it.

God knows the hearts of those who give. He knows everything that is going on in your life and mine.

So...

...when you are facing reduced income with increased expenses and (like the widow) you still give to meet needs in Jesus’ Name, He notices.

...when you are over-busy and utterly exhausted and still take time to serve someone in His name, He notices.

...when you are wracked with pain or are distracted by pressures crashing in on you and you still pray, He notices.

...when you make time and space for worship and make Christian community a priority even though you’re frail or even though you’ve got needy little ones, He notices.

Jesus had a tough Tuesday, marred by rejection from people He loved. That day’s ugliness was redeemed by one act from a God-loving woman who will one day hear, “*Well done.*”

¹⁶ For all we know, the money given by her and others wasn’t stewarded wisely. It’s possible that the managers of the temple didn’t always use money that was given in the best ways possible.