Hi,

Today’s update:

* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

As we continue to live through this time of covid, let’s consider our hearts, just as Jesus tried to force the scribes of his day to consider theirs. (More on the scribes below.)

***Mark 12:28-34, 38-44 (NRSV)***

**One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.**

**As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”**

**He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”**

*Contrasts*

The setting is important to appreciating today’s scripture passage. Jesus has entered Jerusalem to waving palms. He has wept over the city, knowing where things are headed. He has been to the temple, where, invoking the words and actions of Jeremiah, he has pronounced warnings against the temple, the nation, and all those who refuse to embrace Jesus and the path that he has laid before them. In response to all this, groups have come forward to trap Jesus in a mistake. The Pharisees have tried to trap him over the question of taxes. The Sadducees have tried to trap him over the question of the resurrection. Others have tried to use David’s words against him. Now, a crowd is gathered around Jesus and his disciples as they sit in the temple courtyard. The stakes could not be higher.

Perhaps a little melodramatically, Jesus raises his voice so that everyone can hear him. He is ostensibly teaching his disciples but he wants to make sure that no one misses a thing! Jesus draws the crowd’s attention to scribes walking through the temple. How they love to walk around so that all can see their importance. How they love the best seats, the places of honor, the deferential greetings – all as they consume the property of widows. One could hardly paint a more compelling picture of the worst in human pride and greed. And all this is directed at the scribes, those the crowd sees as the learned spiritual leaders of Israel! And it is in stark contrast to one scribe, who seemed to hear Jesus clearly and understand much about the nature of God’s kingdom.

Then Jesus draws the crowd’s attention to the chests in which visitors could place their temple offerings. The rich were stopping by to drop in their gifts and Luke is clear that these are non-obligatory contributions. But Jesus points the listening crowd to a woman, a poor widow, who drops two “lepta” in one of the chests. A lepta was the smallest value coin, equivalent to about 1/128th of the average daily wage! In a pointed comment, Jesus says that the rich gave out of their “left-overs” (from J. Nolland’s translation), whereas the widow dropped in all that she had. In contrast to the gifts of the rich, the widow has made hers out of a passionate and wholehearted commitment. For her, it was a matter of love pointedly expressed in how she used the little money she had.

*A growing heart*

Everyone grows into somebody. The only question is what sort of somebody. In the temple courtyard, Jesus draws a stark contrast. On the one hand, the scribes have allowed their many talents and their successes to grab hold of their hearts, turning them inward. They live for the trappings and privileges of the elite, perhaps blind to the harm they do. Indeed, at best, they have grown to be morally and spiritually blind; at worst, they have grown to be calculating exploiters of the weak.

We know nothing of the widow’s life, but we do know that she has grown to have a heart that is passionately devoted to God’s cause. She is destitute in a way that you and I can’t imagine. There is no Social Security or Medicare. All she has is a couple of nearly worthless coins, yet she offers them to God. There is no reason to think she is a fool. She must know that her two lepta will make zero difference to the temple. But she knows that she gives not based upon what the temple needs, nor even what God needs, but out of her own need, her own faithful heart’s need to give generously. It is her heart that matters, not her household budget. For her, it is a matter of love and Jesus knows that out of love, she has given far more than all the rich people lined up at the chests.

*Where is your heart?*

Is money really the point here? Of course not. Jesus is contrasting the hearts of the scribes and the rich with the heart of this lone widow. But Jesus also knows, as the crowd knows, that how people handle their money is a concrete expression of what they most value, where their hearts are. And there could be no more concrete demonstration of a committed, outwardly-focused heart than the widow dropping in the two nearly worthless coins. It is the concrete expression of her love for God, a love that encompasses her heart, mind, soul, and strength.

The scribes grew to be people focused inwardly, focused upon themselves. The rich gave only token gifts, ensuring that their own social status would stay intact. But the widow – despite her hardships -- gave no concern to herself, but gave all she had for the benefit of others. This ought to remind us that none of us have been saved solely for our own benefit. We have been restored to a right relationship with God so that we may extend God’s mercy and caring to others. We are to love God and love neighbor. Do we? How would someone know?

As believers striving to be evermore Christlike, we always have to remind ourselves of where our lives should be centered, particularly in these anxiety-ridden times. That center is to be our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the incarnation of God’s love. Nothing matters more.

*A bit more: Scribes?*

There are various groups that swirl through and around the Gospel accounts, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, scribes, and more. Who were these groups? Specifically, in today’s passage who were the scribes to which Jesus refers?

In a general sense, a scribe was simply someone who could read and write. That doesn’t seem like much in our culture, but in the ancient world such people were pretty rare. In Jesus’ day, perhaps less than 10-15% of people were literate and many of those were barely so. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that scribal classes developed in ancient cultures. Scribes came to be those who were able to gain the skills and learning needed to build a career around their literacy.

Scribes were the educated intelligentsia and were widely respected for their learning. This would be especially true among the Jews who cherished the Word of God contained in the written Hebrew scrolls. For example, Ezra the scribe was sent by the Persian king to guide and instruct the inhabitants of Judea after the Babylonian exile. Ezra was an official in the Persian Empire and educated in the laws and customs of Israel (see Ezra 7).

The Jewish scribes in Jesus’ day were leaders in the community and were often wealthy. They were easily susceptible to the twin temptations of pride and greed. Of course, who among us is immune to these temptations? There are many warnings to the early Christian leaders as well (Acts 4:32-5:11; 20:33-35; Romans 16:18; Philippians 3:19; 1 Peter 5:2-3; 2 Peter 2:3).

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

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