

As Jesus teaches here in Mark, there is tension between the stories he shares. Did you catch that? There is a clear contrast going on and it brings us to attention as to what it is Jesus is trying to get across.

In short, the contrast Jesus draws between the scribes and the poor widow highlights righteousness.

On the side of the scribes, Jesus begins the telling of the story with “Beware.” That alone raises a red flag. “Beware” is a warning that what is to follow is dangerous and not in our best interest, right? Stay Away! Jesus continues to share that the acts of the religious leaders were done as pompous acts of self-righteousness and attention. And because of this they are met with disdain from Jesus. It is almost as though Jesus is saying, “Who do they think they are?” At the end Jesus says, “They will receive the greater condemnation.”

In contrast, on the side of the poor widow, Jesus begins the elevation of the example of the poor widow with the words, “Truly I tell you.” Anytime we read that in scripture we should stop and pay attention to what follows. Jesus speaks truth and only truth. And as people looking for truth in an untruthful world, Jesus’ teachings are great place to start. In this story, Jesus highlights the poor widow giving of two small coins as a true act of righteousness. The poor widow’s gift was one that included all she had; a symbolism of not just money, but faith and belief and how these must be lived out in our lives in concrete acts and not solely by rituals that no longer hold religious power. The coins represent faith-filled offering found in presenting all of who we are and all we hope to become to God for service to the world.

“Together,” says Roger Nishioka (FOTW), “these two sections read as a lament for and an indictment upon any religious system that results in a poor widow giving all she has so that the system’s leaders may continue to live lives of wealth and comfort. The attack is not on Jewish religious practice. The attack is on any religious practice that masks egotism and greed. The scribes are like leeches on the faithful, benefiting from a religious system that allows poor widows to sacrifice what little they have. We should be outraged by any system that appropriates the property of the poor and the near destitute in order to perpetuate wealth for the elite. If we are brutally honest with ourselves, this is a particular dilemma for many congregations today.”

The battle of righteousness began as early as humanity began turning from God in attempt to have some control. The battle of righteousness has continued to develop and, in some places

more than others, self-righteousness has appeared to be the best choice and only choice in how to live. Even after Jesus lived and died, displaying the perfect portrait of righteousness, some elements of culture have continued to elevate self-righteousness. To be certain, I agree with Roger Nishioka, that today, maybe even especially today with all the worldly “look at me” ad campaigns and status symbols, there is still a battle of righteousness.

To be clear, righteousness is a bit of a funny word. At best, it gets thrown around the church as if everyone knows what it means. Do we? Do we know what righteous means? As God’s beloved children, called, chosen, and claimed, it is important for us to understand and get what righteousness is, so we can stay clear of the “greater condemnation.”

Matthew 5:6 says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” The use of righteousness in this verse serves as a standard for better understanding the Greek meaning of “righteousness.” The term means, “state of him who is as he ought to be... the condition acceptable to God.” Perfectly clear, right? No, not really. Let’s break it down.

“state of him who is as he ought to be”- We were created good and right. In God’s image, our created self is good and right and this is who we ought to be. Being pure and right is “the condition acceptable to God.”

Here is the thing. Sin entered the picture and took us away from who we ought to be and tainted the condition of our lives. Sin makes us unrighteous. Therefore, we need a way back to being pure and right; a way back to righteousness. Enter Jesus. When we turn to God and confess our sins, acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior, the power for God’s grace cleanses us and makes us acceptable to God. When we are in right relationship with God, we experience true righteousness. And when we experience true righteousness (that is God), we are empowered to embody true righteousness.

Author Kira Bridges writes, “The righteousness of Christ does more than save us; it helps us become the person God intends for us to be.”

To understand righteousness, we must first understand that righteousness is only possible with God and by God. For Christians, righteousness is embodied most purely and completely in Jesus and because justice was and is one of Jesus’ great missions on earth, we will find that righteousness is used interchangeably with justice in many places of scripture. Understanding true righteousness then isn’t complete without the act of being just: a moral act, such as being good, pure, and right.

So, if there is still a battle of righteousness, how can we know whether we are ignoring the sign, “Beware,” or following the invitation, “Truly I tell you”? There are at least twelve things to include in experiencing true righteousness in the world today: (adapted from a portrait by Kira Bridges)

1. **We must turn from evil.** Righteousness and sin do not coexist within. As righteous, we must not allow ourselves to be caught up in actions that hurt or harm others or ourselves.
2. **We must embrace justice.** By this I mean we must seek to help those who are oppressed or marginalized in the world. We must speak up for those without a voice, give to those in need, and encourage others to do the same.
3. **We must not fear or worry.** With righteousness comes peace. With peace is the faith that God is with us always and we can trust God in all situations.
4. **We must rely and depend on God.** God is a God of providence with a rich history of providing food, drink, clothing, job, money, and resources. Matthew 6:33 says, “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and God will give you everything you need.”
5. **We must have integrity.** I think this is one of the biggest differences in the battle of true righteousness and self-righteousness. Unlike the religious leaders we read about in the Bible, a righteous person does not put on a show for others, but aims to please the Lord day after day, whether anyone notices or not.
6. **We must live by the Spirit and not by the flesh.** To live by the Spirit is to know the true source of righteousness, Christ. As God’s children, we are called to live in obedience to Christ’s way, through the power of the Spirit, not in the way of the world.
7. **We must abide in God by staying in tune and being familiar with God’s word.** God’s word is a teaching and coaching tool for us to continue a life of true righteousness.
8. **We must live by faith.** Paul declared to the Romans, “It is through faith that a righteous person has life.” Faith in God reassures us of God’s grace that saves us, and it is faith that then guides and motivates us to live according to God’s grace.
9. **We must obey God and God’s commands.** Righteousness is not obtained or earned through good works, but true righteousness is incomplete without faithful action. We are called and equipped to not only be hearers of God’s word, but doers of God’s word.
10. **We must love as God loves.** God is love. Consider the words of 1 John 4:11-12, “No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and God’s love is brought to full expression in us.” By loving others, we combat self-righteousness with true righteousness.
11. **We must be generous.** Christ gave it all and we are called to give our all as well; time, energy, money, gifts, skills.
12. **We must live in peace.** Paul gives us a really good image to draw on for this. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul charges, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, so that if one has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.... And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.”

A statement in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Order* declares, “healing and reconciling and binding up wounds,... ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless,... engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger, and injustice,... giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer,... sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world. The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life.” (FOTW)

God’s church is not to be self-righteous. God’s church exists to help be a witness revealing God’s glory. As a matter of faith, embodying true righteousness celebrates that the more we lose ourselves to God and for God, the more we will gain through God and from God.

Let all God’s people say... Amen.