

“Have You Ever Seen a Humble Peacock?”

Mark 12:38-44

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He got upset because his wife awakened him from what she thought was a bad dream. It appeared to Mrs. Stevenson that her husband and Scottish author, Robert Louis Stevenson, was having a nightmare. After all, he was crying out in horror. “Why did you wake me?” Stevenson said angrily to his wife. “I was dreaming a fine tale.”

He turned that dream into one of his best sellers, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. It took him only three days to write the manuscript and the book hit the shelves on January 25, 1886. It was an instant success and continues to be one of the most read and quoted books on human behavior.

I am sure you know the premise of Stevenson’s book. Dr. Henry Jekyll, a beloved physician, battled a demon inside him that caused him to exploit, hurt and even kill neighbors. This persona was called Edward Hyde. His two natures struggled until Dr. Jekyll committed suicide by drinking poison.

This novel highlighted the inner conflict of humanity’s sense of good and evil. The very phrase “Jekyll and Hyde” has come to signify wild or polar behavior.

I believe Stevenson’s novel gives us a clue to understanding today’s text. **Good and evil reside in each of us.** At times we are like the pompous, self-serving scribes while at other times we are like the quiet, unselfish widow. Let me explain what I mean.

The scribes and Pharisees looked for every opportunity to challenge Jesus and trap him with difficult questions. On this day in the temple they pressed him especially hard, which led him to warn the people of the sinister nature of the religious authorities.

“Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 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” Mark 12:38-40.

Jesus leaves no doubt about how he feels about the hypocritical religious leaders of his time. On this day, he sees nothing good in them. They are greedy, self-centered, self-serving, arrogant and power hungry. Like strutting peacocks, they parade around in long robes craving attention and recognition. They exploit the weakest among them, the widows, ignoring the prophets’ strong words to protect widows from harm. To make matters worse, they try to cover up their despicable behavior by praying long, insincere prayers in the temple, meant only to impress others.

This candid assessment of the true nature of the scribes and Pharisees was followed by a story featuring a widow giving her offering in the temple. Notice the contrast between her behavior and those of the religious leaders. She was sincere, humble and excessively generous. As my friend Joel Gilbert writes, “This woman who had almost nothing gave everything she had to those that deserved nothing.” Listen to Mark’s description of the scene in the temple.

“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, 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 that she had to live on’ ” Mark 12:41-44.

I did not see it at first. My initial reaction to this text was to see the contrast between the insincere scribes and this sincere widow and to condemn the hypocrites among us. I was ready to pounce on Ted Haggard and Mark Foley.

Then it dawned on me. Both of these stories are about us. At times we are the widow, humbly carrying out our responsibilities. We are genuine, sincere, compassionate, kind, grateful and generous to a fault. We support those institutions that are trying to make the world better and trust the leaders guiding them. We do our part to strengthen God's work even when it requires sacrifices, because we believe in Him and His vision for the world.

There is another side to us, though, and it is not pretty. As Gordon McDonald writes, "There is a person deep inside of us not unlike an assassin." Just like the scribes, we can be ruthless when it comes to protecting our interests and maintaining a lifestyle to which we have grown accustomed. We abuse power and hurt others without considering the hardships we inflict upon them. We think life is about us, manipulating and exploiting others to satisfy our desires. You would never know it, however, when we come to church. We cover it up well by going through the motions of worship and praise.

This text reminds me that we are not all bad but neither are we all good. We truly are a mixture of the good, bad and ugly. The ugliness of the scribe and the beauty of the widow reside in all of us.

Which person usually wins that struggle in your life? Which one do you want to prevail? Which do you think those around you prefer?

Which one does our culture call us to be? Which one does our value systems reward? Which one is portrayed as having the most fun and promoting happiness? Which one gets elected to positions of leadership? Which honors and pleases God?

I think the last question is easy to answer based upon Jesus' words in our text. God delights in the person that embodies integrity, humility, compassion, generosity, commitment, dedication and sincerity. These are the traits that bring the best out in us and build bridges to others. These are the virtues that build community and make the world a better place to live. These are the people that inspire greatness in others.

Robert Fulghum is known for his bestseller, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. Alongside his mirror in his bathroom is a picture of a lady that is not his wife. Every morning when he shaves, he glances at her.

Who is she? She is a small humped-over woman wearing sandals, a blue eastern robe and headdress, or sari. She is surrounded by important-looking people in tuxedos, evening gowns and the regalia of royalty. She is Mother Teresa receiving her Nobel Peace Prize.

Fulghum keeps that picture there to remind him every morning that he needs to be more like her if he wants to truly make a positive difference in the world.

How do you develop and nurture the good inside you? Dr. Jekyll concocted a potion he hoped would help him. It did not work. Nurturing good requires discipline and faith.

It begins by curbing our appetites for the things of this world so that people are more important than possessions. You realize that we live in a world that produces more goods than we need. Therefore marketers must convince us to buy what we really don't need. This is why storage units are now big business. Travel any direction from this church and it will not take you long to pass a storage business. We don't have enough space at home to house all we buy, and we are even building bigger houses to hold all our stuff.

This problem is not new. The prophets cried because God's people ignored others' needs so they could spend more on themselves. As a result their world was filled with confusion, anger, fear and violence. Good people turned cold and ruthless. Surely we see the comparison today.

Secondly, good is nurtured inside each of us when we connect our resources with the world's needs. Supporting a child in a Third World Country will make us more compassionate. Going on a mission trip or volunteering to help those around us in need will remind us of what is really important. Aligning ourselves with organizations that address social issues that promote

justice and peace will mobilize us to work for those same causes. Participating in a church that shares the transforming power of the gospel will transform our own lives.

Thirdly, we must ask for God's help to win the internal struggle between good and evil. Fighting the demons of greed, selfishness, arrogance, exploitation, abuse and hypocrisy will require more desire, strength, courage and discipline than we possess. We must have God's help. The powerful pull of consumerism is too great.

Scribbled on a portion of the Berlin Wall that fell were these words. "We came. We saw. We shopped." The glamour of consumerism is strong, isn't it?

This is why we need a close relationship with the Lord. Each day we must look to Him for wisdom and guidance. Periodically, we need to examine our priorities to see if they are in line with His will. We need to look at how we are treating others to see if we reflect His goodness, not our greed.

Will you continue to do this as we focus attention upon our roles as stewards during this month? Will you resolve the tension that at times rages in your soul between being like the arrogant, greedy, power-hungry Pharisees or the humble, unselfish widow? I hope so because so much is at stake in your life and the lives of those around you.

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