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I suppose if I was good at titling sermons we could call this one; *A Visual Illustration of false religion*. Or perhaps we might call it; *Get all you can get ~ From those who will give all they can give*.

Mark and Luke both group these two incidents immediate to each other because I think the Holy Spirit wants us to ponder the two poles. Two opposites, right next to each other, for a blatant contrast. A black and white comparison. False religion in all of it's hypocrisy, and true need totally and tragically unmet.

Matthew on the other hand gives us the full chronicle, blow by blow, as Jesus unmasks the hypocritical false religion that was focused on murdering the true. In Matthew 23, what Mark and Luke reference very briefly in just a short sentence of two, Matthew spends an entire chapter. Woe after woe after woe!

After the fall, in Genesis, after the garden of eden is closed to Adam and Eve and they are driven out, we don't get the full disclosure of what happened but we understand that when God slaughtered animals to provide the skins to cover the nakedness of Adam and his wife Eve, there was within that shed blood, a temporary sacrifice for sin that looks all the way forward to the final sacrifice in the shed blood of Jesus.

Almost immediately the story of Cain and Abel is the story of the beginning of the conflict between false religion and true religion. God received Abel's blood sacrifice. God rejected Cain's offering of fruits from his fields. A blood sacrifice according to God's revelation, and a sacrifice of self styled religion. One accepted and one rejected. Cain slew his brother Abel. False religion murdering true religion. It has always been that way since the first 2 humans born into this fallen world.

And that picture hasn't changed for as long as Satan has ruled this world and God has had His chosen elect, His called out ones, Satan has been murdering them in the name of religion. As Solomon said, there is nothing new under the sun.

It's still happening this morning, and in fact as the time of the end ramps up we can expect to see the murders of the righteous by the hands of Satan's religions increase exponentially.

I can't seem to un-see that image in Iraq of several christians heads sitting in front of a building like several pumpkins on halloween. Just the heads. Islam, the religion of peace.

But that image I just gave you is very different from the one we will look at this morning in our passage. The violence and bloodiness of Islam is one form of Satan's vitriol, right out in the open, blatant, shocking, to the civilized world. We are horrified. That image is barbaric and uncivilized. Raw barbarism unmasked.

But I'm here to tell you that the veil of civilization, which we can follow as christianity spread throughout the Roman empire and had it's effect of taming savage men, what we call western civilization which can be traced back to Paul and his journeys in the book of Acts and even further to Jesus who formed a band of called out men, the apostles, who would be the new standard bearers of the revelation of God, that veil of civilization that restrains savage godless sinfulness, is very thin.

Civilized behaviour is based in God's revealed truth to men. God's moral law is the basis of human respect and dignity. Property ownership, truthfulness, dignity of image bearers, family life, worship, all of it is based in God's revealed laws on tablets of stone. 10 very simple truths that tamed savage sinners.

Gone. In a generation it's gone. Rejected as a flawed bit of patriarchal nonsense that only limits the human experience. We know better now. God's laws are in the ash can of history. And the veil of restraint over sin that we call civilization is growing thinner and thinner. When was the last time you were shocked by something someone did. No God. No laws. No restraint. Sin and violence just leaks out, because that's what's there. That's who we are.

A side-bar to the post-millennial folks who believe that humans will actually just get better and better until Christ's kingdom is achieved and then He comes . . . Are you kidding me? **Are You Kidding Me** ???!

The American experience based in the civilized protestant roots of family, work ethic, property ownership, human dignity, truthfulness, freedom, was the pinnacle of human flourishing ever achieved on earth in Satan's realm since the fall into sin. Is it not interesting that it's slipping away from our grasp at exactly the same time that we ash canned God and His rules.

I don't think we're heading straight to heads on wood posts in front of buildings, but then again, look how quickly that happened in Germany 80 years ago. I think where we're probably headed is to something more like China where you are monitored at all times and gain or lose privileges from the oppressing state based on your obedience to the state. That seems much closer to our reality.

My point is that Satan is in a long conflict with God, and religion is a player in his multi-faceted war against God and God's elect. Everything from christian heads on a stick to the most sophisticated false religion that all but the very elect are fooled by, is used by Satan in his war for dominance on this planet.

Satan uses false religion to crush and murder true religion, in the name of God.

That's the picture that Luke gives us this morning. Religion that just swirls with righteousness on display that has murder inside it's hearts, verses true religion that is outcast by this world's society and culture, almost invisible, but God sees right into the heart and says; That's real.

Jesus looks into the hearts of the most religious men in the one nation that actually was chosen by God to be His possession, the most righteous men in the most righteous land are false religion personified. Bankrupt inside. Foul odor of death inside.

And next to that picture a woman, (strike one in a man's world) who has nothing (strike two, the judgement of God as far as the false religion would believe) a downcast woman with nothing, destitute except for 2 copper pennies that couldn't buy much at all, and she gives those last 2 pennies in worship to God.

What a magnificent contrast the providence of God has provided for us. The poor are rich to God and the rich are bankrupt to God. One group has literally everything this world has got to offer. They are rich. They have the esteem of other men. They are the rock star's! The somebody's. They are known among their peers. Top men. Rich. They have achieved rockstar status. The pinnacle of what this world says is the highest achievement anyone could gain.

They are rich. They are rulers. They are the movers and shakers. The beautiful people. The pinnacles of righteousness according to their false system of measure. They are at the top. Top shelf. In this world. But then, there's that one little problem Jesus defined so simply. *“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?”* Mk. 8:36

These religious men in their false religion that God rejected who were plotting the murder of Jesus had literally gained the whole world. They were at the

top. But, how sad that Satan dupes men and religion is one of his biggest lures. The most religious men in Israel, Satan's men doing Satan's bidding, have gained every prominence this world can offer, these uber religious men will murder Jesus thinking they are doing service for God, and they will spend eternity in flames.

False religion lures. False religion promises . . . whatever it is that Satan uses to float your particular boat. You can be a rock star. You can have it all. You can change the world. You can be significant. You can have a name that means something in the history books. You can save the planet. Whatever it is. Satan has a dead end road for everyone, and most of it is some form of religion.

You do understand that all of the new freedoms that our current cultural secularism currently promises for humans to achieve and thrive is a religion, right? The religion of non-religion has all of the same peers and pressures as any religion that you claw your way to the top of. Secularism is an altar of worship with promises promises. And it shuns those who don't get on the rocketship of the right side of history.

You don't want to make a mistake and say something wrong if you're climbing to the top in that religious crowd. Their shunning and ousting is much more severe than all of the old religions. Satan's current masterpiece. The religion of no religion. The freedom of jettisoning God. Man is at the center of worship. Man is smart enough to fix any problem. Oops. We can't say a gender anymore. People is at the center. They is smart enough to fix all problems.

And the religion of no religion is on track, as always, to crush God's elect. God's chosen called out ones who bow down to the authority of His ancient revelation. False religion always singles out God's elect for punishment.

At this time and in this place, in the context of our passage this morning, the religion in place in Jerusalem, controlled by the Chief priests, and the scribes, the lawyers, and the Pharisees and the Saducees and the Herodians, the elders

of Israel, the religious elite's of the current religion of Satan, they were at the pinnacle of this world and what it could give you.

Satan's current religion in that place and that time was the religion of Israel. It was bankrupt. Spiritually bankrupt. Let's look at our passage before I go on any more tangents into our current state of Satanic religious systems.

45 And while all the people were listening, He said to the disciples,

Jesus directs this discussion at His own elect. His disciples. But He doesn't say, let's step over here out of the hearing of the multitude and the rulers who are all there because they've been trying to trap Him in stupid questions all day. I need to tell you something you need to know, but I don't want to offend these other guys standing around, so let's slip away where it's private.

Matthew says Jesus implicitly addressed both the disciples and the multitudes. He excludes no one from the warning of the danger of the false religion of Israel. True religion always confronts false religion, to its own peril.

He tells the multitude regarding the false religious leaders, They sit in the seat of Moses, therefore DO what they instruct you from Moses. But DO NOT do what they do. They are hypocrites.

You know I'm chomping at the bit to read you the entire chapter of Matthew 23. Jesus gives seven Woes! Woe to you scribes and pharisees, hypocrites . . . ! He decimates their false religion. He lays them bare in their hypocrisy He does it boldly in the presence of all so that perhaps by God's grace, someone might hear and understand and repent and be saved.

He doesn't speak in hushed tones in a corner. He shouts from the rooftops about the hypocrisy and spiritual bankruptcy of these religious men who all the people recognize as the supreme ruling aristocracy of Israel.

At this exact juncture in all of the gospels in the timeline of Jesus earthly ministry, hours before His execution by these religious leaders, these final

statements are the last words of Jesus, in judgement, directed at the leaders of the false religion of Israel. They are the final words to corporate Israel.

When He finishes the long diatribe of woes in Matthew's account His final words are;

38 *“Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! 39 “For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!’”*

Those are the last words Israel as a nation will hear from Jesus until they see Him coming in the sky to deliver them, the remnant of them who have survived the tribulation, when they shall look on Him who they pierced and mourn for Him as for an only Son according to Zechariah 12:10

These words mark the end of His public ministry. All of the miracles. The sinless life. And all that the land of Israel can come up with is He gets his power from a connection with Satan? It's game over time.

46 *“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets,*

False religion is showy. It struts and marches and parades around in robes with flags and smoking pots and bizarre hats and starched vestments. These men are like a caricature cartoon. God told them to put the law of God in a box on their hats so they would never forget His law. It's always before their eyes.

They had a contest going to see who could enlarge those phylactery boxes and make them the most visible and showy. Because of course, size matters. The guy with the biggest phylactery is the most righteous guy there.

There were tassles on the robes of the rabbi's and those had meaning, so of course they had to enlarge the tassles and make them bigger and more conspicuous because, of course, the longer your tassles, the more righteous

you are. Everything described by God for His worship is overblown and expanded by these guys. It's all about the showiness of their religion.

God gave them simple physical things so that they would not forget Him or His laws. But instead of internalizing those simple things, they externalized them and made them ridiculous and showy while internally they were wretched and bankrupt and far from God.

It's all about being someone of noteworthy importance within the strictures of their self made false religion. You want to be a somebody. You work to achieve the position so that when you go to some other town and walk in their synagogue the head guy there gives you the best seat because you are the MOST important person.

They love to be greeted in the marketplace with terms of respect and position. Doctor. The right reverend Doctor such and such. How about Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret. Men love this stuff. Some kind of order of fellows where you climb through the ranks of the organized religion of whatever it is until you have a title of respect above all others. That's what we've got going here.

These men are the most respected high achievers in Israel. They aren't just Rabbi. They are Grand Master Most Exalted Prince of Rabbi. Heads of State in that little world.

But meanwhile they go in their office's every day and Jesus says; *47 who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation.*”

These are the people who pray elegantly and impressively long and spiritual sounding prayers. They've got all the tonality, all of the pauses, the rhythm of deep godliness. These guys pray in King James english that would impress Shakespeare himself. So godly, these folks.

And then they throw a widow out on the streets. They prey on the most vulnerable of people. They have no conscience. Their consciences are seared.

They can pray a prayer that impresses even the angels and turn around 5 minutes later and take a widows house away. Put her on the street. Sell it.

Pray a prayer that makes your eyes leak, and then murder the Son of God. Hell will be hotter for religious charlatans than for ordinary vile sinners. Jesus says so right here.

From Matthew 23, some selections for you; You should re-read that chapter yourself. It's approximately a 5 minute read. I timed it.

13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 24 "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 26 "You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 "Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Folks, what makes false religion so deadly is that it sneaks in, unawares, someone who looks like you and talks like you and says all of the Amen's at the right places like you and you think they're your brother, your sister, and then the false doctrine starts coming out.

Someone you loved and trusted turns out to be a wolf. You thought they were a sheep. They looked like a sheep and bleated like a sheep, and then one day the sheep clothing comes off and they begin doing Satan's bidding from the inside of the sheep fold. They ravage from inside the church.

Paul says to the Ephesian elders; Acts chapter 20;

28 "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

This is Satan's most effective tool. Persecution only makes the church stronger. No, the thing that works is for the wolves to make it inside, and then ravage the sheep.

How? Speaking perverse things to draw the sheep away from safety. Ravage and slaughter the sheep from inside the sheep fold. Satan's best method revealed. And that's what these leaders had done to God's chosen nation. The wolves were running the nation and the sheep were in confused dis-array.

Mark 6:34 And when He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things.

There's nothing more pathetic than sheep with no shepherd. They are

defenseless bundles of furry meat waiting to be eaten. That's the picture of Israel under these rulers who have rejected Jesus for the final time. The shepherd is leaving, He's about to be murdered by the false shepherds who are wolves, and there's nothing left for the sheep but certain peril. It's a sad moment.

Beloved, I look around christendom and I see mostly the same condition. The lucky sheep are only being fleeced. The less lucky ones are getting eaten alive by false shepherds. Torn to pieces for whatever the shepherds can get.

Ezekiel 34 is shocking; 2 *“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and tell them that this is what the Lord GOD says: ‘Woe to the shepherds of Israel, who only feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed their flock? 3 You eat the fat, wear the wool, and butcher the fattened sheep, but you do not feed the flock....”*

OK, these pharisees and scribes are really really bad people because they are a false religion and anyone that follows their life styles and the religion they live, is going to be twice as much a son of hell as they are. That's the situation in Israel. It's as bad as it can get.

But God in His providence gives us a picture of the pathos, the pathetic result of the fleecing, the ravaging of the sheep within false religion.

Ch. 21: 1 And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. 2 And He saw a certain poor widow putting in two small copper coins. 3 And He said, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; 4 for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.”

This is actually a sermon illustration for the previous sermon. We don't know anything about this lady beyond what Jesus tells us. We don't know her heart condition. We aren't told that she's a mountain of faith. We don't know what her motives were in giving her last two pennies. We don't know if she had motives based in real faith or if it was superstition. We simply aren't told.

We've all heard countless sermon's about the widow's mite. Does the fact that she gave all that she had equate to a warm affection for God and a simple faith that He will provide for her? Maybe. But Jesus doesn't really allude to that. We don't know that. People tell us that because it's motivational.

But in the context of what has just happened in Israel. Jesus has pronounced final judgement on this nation and it's religious system and it's ruling class, what is the purpose of this little illustration at this exact point.

Actually the incident illustrates perfectly everything that was wrong with the false religion of Israel. Here's the real story exactly as told by Jesus. A widow goes into God's house poor, gets fleeced, and comes out destitute.

In the original language the first word translated as poor; *And He saw a certain **poor** widow putting in two small copper coins.* Here the word in the greek is penichran. It means poor. Needy. She has no surplus and scrapes along with bare essentials. Always in need. She doesn't have enough. Ever.

*3 And He said, "Truly I say to you, this **poor** widow put in more than all of them;* This time the word used that is translated poor is ptōchē. And it definitely means a person who is destitute. This is starvation poor. She entered as a person in need and she exited as a person who was destitute, thanks to the religion of Israel and the fat cats at the top.

James learned the lesson that Jesus teaches His disciples here very well. James 1:27 *This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

If you turn those simple words inside out you have something like this; Impure religion that is false and defiled in the sight of God is to abandon orphans or perhaps even better, murder them in the womb, and fleece the widows for everything you can get and act just like the world in every possible sin they can conceive.

That is exactly what Jesus just pronounced judgement on in Israel, His final words to that nation, and it is also exactly what we are seeing in our nation as churches are being coerced to become exactly the same as the world is to the helpless. Slaughter the unwanted children. Abandon the orphans to wolves. Promise the widows wealth and happiness and husbands if they will only send what little they have as seed money for the promised blessings.

That widow walking in poor and walking out destitute, that widow was the perfect illustration of what wolves do to sheep. Israel's rulers were wolves. The people of Israel were helpless sheep. Those wolves will slaughter the Good Shepherd within hours of Him pronouncing their judgement and illustrating the condition of that land in the widow who goes in poor and comes out stripped and destitute.

It was the most zealous religious self righteous people on earth who murdered the sinless innocent Son of God. The story of Cain and Abel is what we call typology. They were a picture story, types of the future battle between true religion and false religion. The deeper battle between God and Satan.

Cain slew Abel. The religious leaders in Israel slew their own Messiah. In the tribulation period, the righteous are lined up like sheep in a slaughter house and beheaded all day long. The war never ceases until the day that Israel looks up and sees the one whom they pierced and says; Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord.

Jesus will return and depose Satan to chains. He will re-take this world, crush all of His enemies, and rule in perfect peace, in this world, at Jerusalem for a thousand years. And then we will be with Him forever in a new heavens and new earth.

Until then; Chaos is normal. Satan slaughters God's true elect. But ultimate victory belongs to the Son of God, and we belong to Him. We are IN Him.