



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**"The End of Religion"**

**Mark 12:38-44**

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**November 8th, 2015**

May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There was once a fiery preacher who possessed a powerful but unusual gift. He found that, from an early age, when he prayed for individuals, they would supernaturally lose all of their religious convictions. They would invariably lose all of their beliefs about the prophets, the sacred Scriptures, and even God. So he learned not to pray for people but instead limited himself to preaching inspiring sermons and doing good works.

However, one day while traveling across the country, the preacher found himself in conversation with a businessman who happened to be going in the same direction. This businessman was a very powerful and ruthless merchant banker, one who was honored by his colleagues and respected by his adversaries.

Their conversation began because the businessman, possessing a deep, abiding faith, had noticed the preacher reading from the Bible. He introduced himself to the preacher and they began to talk. As they chatted together this powerful man told the preacher all about his faith in God and his love of Christ. He spoke of how his work did not really define who he was but was simply what he had to do.

"The world of business is a cold one," he confided to the preacher, "and in my line of work I find myself in situations that challenge my Christian convictions. But I try, as much as possible, to remain true to my faith. And so I attend a local church every Sunday, participate in a prayer circle, engage in some youth work, and contribute to a weekly Bible study. These activities help to remind me of who I really am."

After listening carefully to the businessman's story, the preacher began to realize the purpose of his unseemly gift. So he turned to the businessman and said, "Would you allow me to pray a blessing into your life?"

The businessman readily agreed, unaware of what would happen. Sure enough, after the preacher had muttered a simple prayer, the man opened his eyes in astonishment.

"What a fool I have been for all these years!" he proclaimed. "It is clear to me now that there is no God above, who is looking out for me, and that there are no sacred texts to guide me, and there is no Spirit to inspire and protect me."

As they parted company the businessman, still confused by what had taken place, returned home. But now that he no longer had any religious beliefs, he began to find it increasingly difficult to continue in his line of work. Faced with the fact that he was now just a hard-nosed businessman working in a corrupt system, rather than a man of God, he began to despise his activity. Within months he had a breakdown, and soon afterward gave up his line of work completely. Feeling better about himself, he then went on to give to the poor all the riches he had accumulated and began to use his considerable managerial expertise to challenge the very system he once participated in, and to help those who had been oppressed by it.

One day, many years later, he happened upon the preacher again while walking through town. He ran over, fell at the preacher's feet, and began to weep with joy. Eventually he looked up at the preacher and smiled, "Thank you, my dear friend, for helping me discover my faith."

Beware, said Jesus, of religious people whose faith is separate from their ethics, who, on the one hand, pray like saints, but on the other hand, "devouring widows houses." People don't realize that Jesus was a critic of religion, but over and over again he warns us to be cautious of religious people. And in this section of Mark's gospel, he contrasts the religious leaders who wear fancy robes and command respect, with this poor widow who comes to the temple and offers all she has. Jesus is not at all interested in religion. Rather he is interested in the way we give our lives, what we give them for, how we pour them out. He is interested not in religion but in faith, which is a different thing.

If our religion, our church going, our prayers, our sermons, our songs, do not lead us to pour out our lives in love in the world, it is useless. The end of religion, that is its purpose, its ultimate goal, the good it has to offer is to help people give their lives away- generously for the sake of love in the world. And it doesn't matter what religion we are talking about, at the heart of every major religion of the world is the love command. In the end, it doesn't matter how we pray or the name we name, but what matters is the way and the extent to which we pour ourselves out for the sake of love in the world. That is the end of religion.

In your bulletin this week you received a little red square of paper. And in our act of remembering, we witnessed and remembered the 114,000 Canadian lives that have been lost in war since 1900. Each one had a life to live, and they lived it and they lost it in war. We remember them today and on November 11th because their life mattered, was precious, and was offered for the sake of others. They gave it all, just like the widow. And it is important to remember them, and to be thankful for them. It is equally important to remember that you too have a little red square, a life to offer that is precious and matters- you too have an all to give. Your life, quite literally is in your hands.

So I invite you to take your little square of paper and hold it in your hand for a moment, much like, I would imagine, the widow held her one coin in her hand as she approached the temple. I don't know what you have been told over the years about your life, your character, who you are and what you have to offer the world. I do know that when Jesus looked at the poor widow who came to the temple that day with her small coin, he had deep respect for her and all that she offered. I believe he looks with the same depth of respect at what you have to offer. The measure of our faith is not to be found in our religiosity, but in the way we give ourselves.

So today I want you to think about that little red square you have in your hand. It represents what you give to your family. It represents what you do with your time. It represents the way you invest your emotion in the people around you. It represents what you do with your money. It represents your working life. Unlike the businessman, we don't separate our religious life and the rest of our life. It is all one, all offered, all an act of faith. Today there will be 2 kinds of offerings gathered: the usual financial one to support the ministry of Northwood, and the offering of your small red square that represents the ways in which you pour out your life for the sake of love in the world. While the choir sings, I invite you to hold your red square and let it come to mean all that you offer.