

When Less is More
Mark 12:38-44
ABC 4/28/24

As we continue our study of Mark's gospel, we've seen Jesus enter Jerusalem to the approval of the crowds (11:1-11), cleansed the temple (11:15-19), & have a series of disputes with Pharisees, Herodians, & scribes (11:27-12:37). He's now teaching in the temple (12:35) & all that remains is to further teach the disciples (chpt 13), the passion events (chpts 14-15), & the resurrection (chpt 16). Our text (12:38-44) contains 2 stories tied together by the mention of *widows*. They contrast the pride, greed, & hypocrisy of the scribes with the humility & generosity of a widow. After repeatedly clashing with the religious leaders, Jesus now pronounces judgment on them. This condemnation is connected to the widow that follows with the reference to the scribes who **devour the widows' houses** (39). These 2 events form a pair, representing negative & positive examples for us. Let's read **38-40** to begin.

1. Warning to Oppressors To hear Jesus condemn the scribes must have shocked those listening since they were held in such high esteem. The scribes' words were considered to have divine authority. The Jews of Jesus' day were taught that scribes were to be respected almost as much as God & deserved more honor & respect than any other people. They were taught that the greatest act someone could do was to give money to a scribe. Of course, it was the scribes who taught this. According to tradition, Moses received the law & gave it to Joshua, who gave it to the elders, who gave it to the prophets, who gave it to the scribes. The Mishnah, a written account of the oral laws, declares, *It is more culpable to transgress the words of the Scribes than those of the Torah.*¹ The scribes were revered as the gatekeepers of the law & the protectors of the people. In theory, they defined the law for everyone & held everyone to its standards, obedience to which, they promised, brought blessing. In reality they were hypocrites. Jesus had earlier warned the disciples against **the leaven of the Pharisees & the leaven of Herod** (8:15). Now He warns against the pride, greed, & hypocrisy of the scribes & gives 6 examples of their pride & posturing, all related to their love of status & position.

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p 1:625

1) A **long robe** was a flowing robe, like those used for ceremonial or festal occasions.² These were full-length, expensive, ornate outer garments. On their fringes were the required tassels (Num 15:38–40; cf Mt 9:20), which the scribes enlarged in a display of their supposed piety (Mt 23:5). Some think scribes were often priests or were dressing in imitation of the priests as a sign of religious devotion. Whatever the case, their **long robes** were meant to show off their status as religious leaders.

2) **Greetings in the marketplaces** indicated deference & respect, with the lesser person initiating the greeting & using titles like such as *Rabbi*, signifying they were the interpreters of God's law (Mt 23:7), *Father* (Mt 23:9) because they were the source of spiritual life & truth, & *Leader* (Mt 23:10), as those who directed them spiritually. Their flamboyant robes marked them as scribes, so everyone knew who they were. To fail to admiringly greet them with honor was considered a serious insult.

3) The **chief seats** or *important seats in the synagogues* were the seats facing the congregation in front of the ark containing the sacred scrolls.³ This was reserved for honored & respected guests.

4) **Places of honor at banquets** were signs of social status with the best seats & best food given to the most honored guests. In Lk 14 (7–11) Jesus encourages His followers not to seek the greater positions at such banquets, but to humbly take a lower seat. Not so with the scribes.

5) **Devour widows' houses**. Their greed led them, in blatant disregard of the teaching of the OT (Ex 22:22; Dt 10:18; 14:29; 24:17–21; 27:19; etc), to prey on the most helpless members of society & **devour widows' houses**. Widows & fatherless children were among the most vulnerable & defenseless members of society.⁴ Scripture is full of commands to care for them, as well as warnings that God is their defender & will avenge those who exploit them.⁵ How did scribes **devour widows' houses**? Josephus tells of a Jewish scoundrel exiled to Rome who acted like a scribe & succeeded in persuading a high-standing woman named Fulvia to make substantial gifts to the

² BDAG A *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT & Other Early Christian Literature*, p 946

³ William Lane, *Mark*, p 440

⁴ Is 1:7; Jer 7:6; 49:11

⁵ Ex 22:22; Dt 10:18; 24:17; 27:19; Ps 68:5; 146:9; Is 1:23; 10:1–4; Jer 7:6; 22:3; 49:11; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5; Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim 5:16; Jas 1:27

temple in Jerusalem.⁶ The gifts, however, were embezzled, & Rome was outraged. Such incidents may lie behind the charge of devouring **widows' houses**.⁷ Isaiah warned against those who robbed widows, saying,

Woe to those who enact evil statutes & to those who constantly record unjust decisions, So as to deprive the needy of justice & rob the poor of My people of their rights, So that widows may be their spoil & that they may plunder the orphans. Now what will you do in the day of punishment, & in the devastation which will come from afar? To whom will you flee for help? & where will you leave your wealth? Nothing remains but to crouch among the captives Or fall among the slain. In spite of all this, His anger does not turn away & His hand is still stretched out (Is 10:1-4).

While scribes weren't permitted to charge for their services, nothing prohibited them from receiving contributions for personal support & they consumed the limited resources of those who had the least. They abused their hospitality, defrauded them of their estates, mismanaged their property, & took their houses as pledges for debts that they could never repay.⁸ They demanded that everyone, including poor widows, give money to purchase God's blessings.⁹ The 1st century document, *Testament of Moses*, says of the priestly nobility in Jerusalem that *they consume the goods of the poor, saying their acts are according to justice, while in fact they are simply exterminators (7:6-7)*. Jesus had just defined genuine religion to be love for God & for neighbor (29-31). The scribes, however, harmed others rather than loving them.

6) & for appearance's sake offer long prayers. To look good to others they offered **long, public prayers** to showcase their imagined holiness & devotion to God. Jesus earlier commanded, **When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand & pray in the synagogues & on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full (Mt 6:5)**. He told a parable in which a **Pharisee stood & was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector'** (Lk 18:11). Yet it wasn't the arrogant, self-righteous Pharisee who was justified but the broken, humbled, repentant tax collector (14). The scribes' prayers, like the rest of their religion, were nothing but a pretense, a sham, an outward show designed not to honor God but to exalt

⁶ Ant. 18.81-84

⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, pp 378-379

⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, p 1643

⁹ John MacArthur, *Mark 9-16*, p 219

themselves. These weren't the only problems Jesus had with the religious leaders. In Mt 23 Jesus goes into it more deeply.

Woe to you, scribes & Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in (13).

Woe to you, scribes & Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea & land to make one proselyte; & when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves (15)

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated" (16).

Woe to you, scribes & Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint & dill & cummin, & have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice & mercy & faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others (23).

Woe to you, scribes & Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones & all uncleanness (27).

Woe to you, scribes & Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets & adorn the monuments of the righteous, & say, "If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets" (29–30).

Then, summing it all up, the Lord declared, **You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? (33).** Such exploitation, Jesus says, won't go unpunished on judgment day.

They will receive greater condemnation. As leaders are entrusted with responsibility over God's flock, they will receive greater punishment (Js 3:1). Instead of being rewarded by God for their self-righteous, self-promoting religion as they expected, the scribes would **receive** the opposite, **greater condemnation**. It's a sobering reality that those who know the truth & reject it will receive more severe punishment than those who never heard it. Jesus condemns them here for their pride, greed, & hypocrisy. This judgment of the scribes concludes Mark's account of Jesus' public ministry.

2. Widow's Offering Jesus' presence in the temple in His last week before His crucifixion began with His condemnation of the buyers & sellers for the animal sacrifices & ends with His praise of a widow who sacrifices her all for God. **41-44** The setting of this episode is the Court of Women, the 1st inner court of the temple where no Gentiles were allowed. The term translated **treasury** could also mean *offering receptacle* referring to one of the receptacles where offerings were placed, the *collection* or *offering box*. The Mishnah speaks of 13 *Shofar chests* (horn-shaped receptacles) located in the temple. These were inscribed with the names of various kinds of offerings, &

worshipers would put their offerings in the specified receptacle.¹⁰ Each of the chests had inscriptions saying what the offerings were for: *New Shekel dues, Old Shekel dues, Bird offerings, Young birds for the whole offering, Wood, Frankincense, Gold for the Mercy-seat, &*, on 6 of them, *Freewill-offerings*.¹¹ The receptacles sat in plain view, & their clinking & clanking of coins dropped in advertised the size of the gifts. The giver was tempted to think about the clink value of his offerings. Would a few loud clanks be most impressive or a prolonged shower of smaller clinks? Perhaps, like a fireworks display, the best show would be a number of small clinks followed by a rousing finale of several great clanks. Whatever the case, Jesus finds a place to sit & observe people dropping coins in these various receptacles. The giving of gifts to God's sanctuary was established in the days after God brought the people out of Egypt. He commanded the people to bring gifts to be used in the construction of the Tabernacle:

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Tell the sons of Israel to raise a contribution for Me; from every man whose heart moves him you shall raise My contribution. This is the contribution which you are to raise from them: gold, silver & bronze, blue, purple & scarlet *material*, fine linen, goat *hair*, rams' skins dyed red, porpoise skins, acacia wood, oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil & for the fragrant incense, onyx stones & setting stones for the ephod & for the breastpiece. Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them" (Ex 25:1–8).

Later, God gave them instructions for tithing. Because Israel was an agricultural society, they were told to bring tithes of their grain, new wine, & oil, & the firstborn of their animals (Dt 14:22–29). If the journey to the tabernacle or temple was long, they could exchange their gifts for money & bring that. These gifts supported the priests & Levites & were also to help foreigners, orphans, & widows (Dt 26:12). What did Jesus see as He sat & watched the various people give their gifts? Initially, He saw that **many rich people ... putting in large sums** (41). The wealthy were donating large numbers of coins. The amount given would be obvious by the rattle of the coins as they were poured into the metal receptacles. It shouldn't be assumed that Jesus disapproved of all the offerings of the wealthy. It's likely there were a number who had the right motives. But Jesus also saw much that displeased Him. Public giving such as this setting promotes self-centered showiness. It's like the man who stood up in a church meeting about finances & said, *I want to*

¹⁰ *Mishnah, Šeqal. 6:1, 5*

¹¹ *Mishnah, Shekalim XI.5.*

anonymously give \$10,000. As Jesus was watching, **42** This is the most famous donation in history. She undoubtedly approached quietly with her head bowed, hoping to draw no attention to herself. Though she didn't know Jesus was watching, she knew that God saw her, & that was whom she wanted to please. Her humble motivation could be nothing but love. She was living out the *Shema*, loving God with all she had. The NASB translates her gift as **2 small copper coins, which amount to a cent.** Literally, she put in 2 *lepta*. The term *lepton*, meaning a tiny thing, was used for a small copper coin, the smallest in circulation in Palestine. Mark explains that 2 *lepta* are equivalent to a *quadrans*, worth 1/64 of a denarius (cf Mt 5:26) for his Roman readers. They're too small to sustain the woman for long, but large enough to matter as 2 *lepta* would buy a modest meal. Being small coins, they hardly make a sound as she drops them in the offering boxes. Only Jesus notices the 2 small clinks & understands their significance. The widow's gift was noteworthy because it was made in such stark contrast to some of the others, probably including the scribes, who wanted people to see their devotion. The last thing this poor woman wanted was to be noticed. She may have even been ashamed of the meager donation she gave. **43-44** Jesus often summons His disciples for special instructions or teaching (3:13; 6:7; 8:1; 10:42). The importance of the teaching is marked by His solemn introduction, **Truly I say to you.** Jesus says the woman's small offering exceeded even the largest gifts of the wealthy (some believe He said she gave more than all of them combined), since they gave a small percentage of their wealth, while she gave, everything she had. She serves as an example of fulfilling the greatest commandment, loving God with all we are (12:29-32). For most people who came to the treasury, there was no sacrifice involved. Their gifts cost them hardly anything in terms of their substance. But the widow made a very costly sacrifice, even though it was just 2 small coins. Seeing this, Jesus said to His disciples that the widow had put in more than the others. He bases His calculation, not on what she gives, but on what she has left. He knows how tempting it would be for her to think, *This little bit won't matter, so I'll let the rich fill the coffers.* Jesus knows how easy it would be for the widow to give one coin, or none at all, rather than all her coins. Nothing was calculating about this widow's gift. She didn't have a moment of indecision. She didn't shift from foot to foot while considering 1st this coin &

then that one. She didn't calculate percentages. She didn't check her budget. She didn't ask what she would get in return. She had only 2 coins, & she gave them both, probably feeling bad she couldn't give more. As a side note, there's no evidence that this widow ever knew what Jesus thought of her gift. Why does Mark include these 2 stories side-by-side? Is He condemning the religious system or praising the widow's devotion? Probably both. Some say this isn't a commendation of the widow, but shows how the religious leaders **devour the widows' houses**. In this view, it isn't set in contrast to the previous one but illustrates the condemnation of the religious leaders begun in vs 40. The temple, which should be **a house of prayer for all the nations**, is instead **a robbers' den** (11:17; Is 56:7; Jer 7:11), with its corrupt leadership snatching the last coins from a poor widow's hand. But Jesus commends the widow, who gives all she had, & contrasts her with the wealthy, who give out of their abundance. I don't believe she can simply be seen as a victim, since she does exactly what Jesus earlier commanded the rich man to do: to give all he had (10:21). She serves as a positive example not only against the greedy religious leaders but also against the rich young ruler, who couldn't bring himself to give up all for the kingdom of God. This is the model of Jesus Himself, who gives up His life for us (10:45; 14:22, 24) & calls on us to do the same. **If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, & take up his cross & follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake & the gospel's will save it** (8:34–35). The gift that most pleases God is everything one possesses. After all, all we have belongs to God & is given to us to be stewards of. While Jesus might be dismayed at the religious leaders misusing this woman's offering, He admires her faith & sacrificial gift. Her gift reminds us of the widow of Zarephath, who gave the last of her food to Elijah & was rewarded by God with a jar of meal that didn't run out & a jug of oil that didn't fail (1 Kgs 17:8-16). At the same time, it's possible Jesus points out the widow as an example of what He's just been talking about: beware of the scribes who devour widows' houses so they can go around in long robes & claim places of honor for themselves. Perhaps Jesus wants us to see that both sides of the equation are wrong. Both the poor widow & the wealthy scribes are examples of a corrupt & broken system. Was the woman duped into giving all she had by the false promise of Jewish legalism that doing

so would bring blessing? If so, she's a tragic example of how the corrupt religious system mistreated widows. If ever a person had a reason not to give, it was she. Yet she gives anyway. She knows she's giving to the hands of those who've neglected her, yet her giving is ultimately to God Himself. No wonder Jesus condemns the hypocrisy of the scribes. Jesus came to replace their ministry of neglect with one of compassion. He'll build a new temple in Himself that will truly minister to the broken and neglected. He'll lay down His life for her in a way that far exceeds her faithful giving. In doing so, she'll have a new husband, Christ Himself, & He'll never leave her nor forsake her. Was Jesus angry with the religious system that had taken her last cent? I'm sure He was. But the initial call of Jesus to the fishermen beside the sea was to leave all & **follow Me** (1:17). This is exemplified in the widow giving her 2 small coins. In contrast to those who **put in out of their surplus**, she gave **out of her poverty... all she owned, all she had to live on** (44). I believe this widow's selfless act isn't highlighted to expose the gulf between her humble piety & the pretense of the scribes, although it does that. The main purpose of the widow is as a model of discipleship. No gift, whether of money, time, or talent, is too insignificant to give if it's given to God with the right motives. & what is truly given to God, regardless of how small & insignificant, is transformed into something far greater. What may look like a generous gift may be little in comparison with what one could give. The widow's giving **all she owned** is a fulfillment of the call to discipleship to follow Jesus by losing one's life (8:35). The final words of this chapter might be paraphrased, *she lay down her whole life*, which is what God calls us all to do & is what Jesus did on the cross for us. This woman is an example of one who loves God with everything she has. She contrasts with the rich because she's impoverished. She contrasts with the teachers of the law who bask in their pretentious piety, while she has no standing in society. But she loves God & will sacrifice all she has in service to God. While the widow is to be praised for her sacrificial giving, such giving to a corrupt, spiritually bankrupt, & oppressive temple is to be lamented. She exhibits unquestioning devotion to her God & His temple. But the religious leaders live in luxury on their cut from the contributions made by the poor. In a sense, hers is a misguided gesture, a case of the poor giving to the rich, the victim lining the pockets of the oppressor. The temple had become a place where

widows were robbed (Is 1:14–17). Now that she’s given all she has, what will happen to her? Who in the religious community will help her? What will happen to the money she gave? Will some of it be used to bribe Judas to betray his master? She gives away her living for the sake of the temple. The religious leaders will throw away Jesus’ life to preserve their power base. The contrasting portraits of the scribes & the poor widow illustrate 2 radically different responses to the kingdom of God. The scribes represent those who are in it for themselves, building personal empires rather than God’s kingdom. They violate the 2 greatest commands because they love self rather than God & exploit others for personal gain. The widow, by contrast, isn’t thinking of herself when she gives out of her poverty. She lives a life of trust & dependence on God. In these contrasting passages, we see 2 of the greatest dangers for Christians, pride & abuse of power & 2 of the most important character traits for godly people, self-sacrificial service & total commitment to the kingdom of God. The scribes exploited others because of their selfish arrogance. Cult leaders are famous for doing the same. Whether it’s the TwinRay Cult here in Ashland¹² or Jim Jones of the People’s Temple in Guyana these leaders abuse others for personal gain. Yet abuse of power isn’t limited to cult leaders. Christian leaders sometimes have excessive power without adequate accountability. While the televangelist scandals of the 70s & 80s are the most visible examples of this, it’s occurred throughout church history. In John’s 3rd letter, he criticizes Diotrephes, **who loves to be first** while withholding from others (3 Jn 9–10). In 2 Cor, Paul speaks of **false apostles**, who masquerade as true apostles but who exploit & take advantage of believers (2 Cor 11:13, 20). Such abuse inevitably results when leaders view themselves as indispensable to God’s kingdom & unaccountable to others. Some scribes of Jesus’ day **devoured widows’** homes because they were more interested in padding their own wallets than in the needs of others. They’d lost sight of their accountability before God. In contrast to the scribes stands the poor widow, who humbly gives to God instead of hoarding her meager resources for herself. Her example parallels that of the churches in Macedonia, which Paul says gave out of their extreme poverty to help the struggling churches of Judea (2 Cor 8:1–5). Those who give in this way know their resources aren’t their own

¹² <https://www.gurumag.com/inside-the-twinray-cult/>

but belong to God. We're reminded of the early church in Acts, which self-sacrificially met the needs of others, & individuals like Barnabas, who was willing to sell his own property to help the poor (2:44–45; 4:32–37). Unfortunately, there's a disease rampant in our day that is particularly lethal: *cirrhosis of the giver*. We see this in Ananias & Sapphira in Acts 5. It's a condition that renders the hand immobile when it attempts to move from the billfold to the offering plate. This condition disappears when personal hobbies, comfort, & entertainment call for more. This is a heart problem. The only remedy is to fall in love with God with all your heart, for where your heart is, there will your treasure be (Mt 6:21).¹³ Behind self-sacrificial giving lies a total commitment to God Himself. To give from poverty means your eyes aren't on earthly rewards but on treasures in heaven (Mt 6:20). This theme of self-sacrificial service has been a major one throughout Mark's gospel, as Jesus describes the cost of discipleship. Those who want to be Jesus' disciples must take up their cross & follow Him (8:34–35). In his parallel passage, Luke adds the word **daily** to make it clear that this isn't only about martyrdom (Lk 9:23). It means **daily** placing God's kingdom & God's values above our own. This is the mark of true discipleship. The woman sacrifices all she had. It was this that the disciples, & all of us, need to understand, for the call to the gospel is a call for absolute surrender to God & total trust in Him.¹⁴ Let me be clear: This isn't an example story in the sense that Jesus commands us to do the same as the widow. He doesn't demand that we drop every last penny in the offering box. However, we should pray & listen carefully to determine Jesus' call to us concerning our stewardship. It's not OK to give God a bit of what's left over after we've paid the bills. He expects us to put Him 1st, not last. Are the sins of pride, greed, & hypocrisy controlling you? Are you a scribe? Repent & confess those sins & be forgiven by Jesus who took the punishment for your sins by giving His all. How's your giving? Is it sacrificial in any way? I pray we give because we love God with all we are & it shows in our generosity. What truly motivates our giving? May it be because we give to to the God who sees & has provided all we need in Jesus Himself.

¹³ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 2, p 134

¹⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, p 443