

## Mark 12:38-44

38 And as he was teaching,<sup>1</sup> he said, “Look out for the scribes<sup>2</sup>, who like to walk around in long robes, accept greetings in the marketplace, 39 and have the best seats in the synagogue and places of honor at banquets.<sup>3</sup> 40 They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, say long prayers. They will receive the greater judgment.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Before diving into this passage, it is important to set the context. Jesus and his disciples have finally arrived in Jerusalem (11:1-11) to the shouts of acclamation from the crowds. Following this, Jesus came to the temple and began driving out those who were selling and buying. The next day, Jesus returned again to the temple area and upon entering he was quickly questioned by the chief priests, scribes, and elders concerning his authority. After this encounter, Jesus begins to teach his disciples and the crowds listening in. It is in this midst of this teaching moment that Jesus turns his attention onto a portion of the leadership.

<sup>2</sup> It might be helpful to have a brief understanding of the role of scribes within ancient Israel and how that role carried over into Jesus' time. Scribes were initially secular officials who could understand and keep track of legal documents. They'd be the equivalent to lawyers and paralegals today. Their biggest contribution involved financial transactions. Their name is drawn from their skill in writing and this, plus their position as literate members of society, helped to set them above most as a separate class within the social composition. Following the exile to Babylon, the scribes took on a further role as teachers and interpreters of God's Law. This new responsibility, linked with those they previously held, set the scribes apart as a necessary religious office; one they were called to fulfill faithfully. Not everyone was able to live into this calling.

<sup>3</sup> Jesus tells his disciples to look out for those scribes who are full of their own self-importance. In doing so, he isn't insinuating that every scribe is rotten; rather, he's letting his disciples know that they need to beware of those scribes who like to make a show out of their profession.

We often assume that holding a religious profession shields a person from the temptations and drudgery that comes with daily living. Yet, “religious office is not a safeguard against hypocrisy and greed. Indeed this passage, like many others, shows that unfaithfulness can masquerade as faithfulness, and pretense can parade as piety, even at the highest levels in the household of faith (Robert A. Bryant, “Mark 12:38-44 – Exegetical Perspective” *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4* (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009), 285).” What Jesus points out in this brief section is the reality that the scribes are susceptible to corruption and greed. In the honor-conscious Greco-Roman world, there were those scribes who worried about their appearances when they were out and about as well as how they were received by others. Jesus warns his disciples to be on the lookout for those who are worried about status and honor; those who want their presence to be known because of how they dress, or their willingness to be honored in public places no matter the occasion. He warns them to beware the scribes who are only out to hold the most influential seats in the synagogue, having their hands directly involved with the worship of the people for their own gain and influence, as well as looking out for these same scribes who are so wrapped up in their own self-importance that they are concerned about where they sit for glamorous banquets. This hypocrisy receives harsh judgment from Jesus.

<sup>4</sup> “The reason for this harsh judgment becomes plain in 12:40a, where Jesus rips off the scribes' mask of respectability to reveal the brutal, even demonic reality underneath. This contrast between appearance and actuality is reinforced by the transition from ‘feasts’ at the end of 12:39 to ‘devour’ at the beginning of 12:40; while the first word suggests orderly civilized dining, the second implies the sort of ravenous assault on food that is characteristic of wild animals (Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16* (Yale University Press: New

41 And he sat down opposite the treasury, watching how the crowd placed money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.<sup>5</sup> 42 And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins worth a few cents. 43 Calling his disciples and said to them, “Amen I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed out of their abundance; but she, out of her poverty, has put in all she had, her whole livelihood.”<sup>6</sup>

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Haven, 2009), 854).” The specific charge that Jesus levels at those scribes who were concerned with ostentatious appearances is that they “devour the houses of widows.”

Within the Old Testament, widows, orphans, resident aliens, and the poor are held up as persons who are of special concern to God, “since they have no social support system. Their well-being, therefore, is a sacred trust, and to violate it, for example, by defrauding them, is an especially heinous crime (Marcus, 855).” Thus, what Jesus is calling his disciples is to beware those who are unscrupulous; hiding behind a veneer of piety and faith while discharging their duties in the most dishonest and distasteful way possible.

<sup>5</sup> After this lengthy time of teaching (remember that he has been on his feet since 11:27), Jesus sits down opposite from one of the many treasury boxes located in the temple area. “His rhetorical method here fits into a time-honored prophetic pattern of critical observation and negative comment about what is going on in the Jerusalem Temple. The act of sitting may itself be significant, both because the position can carry a connotation of judgment and because such a posture in the sacred precincts may have been unusual and thus an implicit claim to authority (Marcus, 860).” And in doing so, Jesus observes all those who are able to give out of their abundance.

<sup>6</sup> Jesus is struck by the appearance of a poor widow as she makes her way to the treasury box, dropping in two copper coins that were the lowest form of coinage at that time. It would be the equivalent of two pennies in the offering plate. Following this woman’s actions, Jesus calls his disciples to himself and raises this poor widow up above all the others who are placing their offering into the box. Struck by the contrast she is seeing, Jesus wants to show the difference between those who give out of their abundance and those who give out of their poverty. This poor widow, according to Jesus, hasn’t just given out of her poverty; she’s given out of her very life. Hers is a costly discipleship in continuation with Jesus’ words on the way out of Caesarea Philippi; this is truly a person who gives up everything by trusting in the gracious mercy of God.