

Whose Applause?

Mark 12:38–44

Mark now places this short teaching of Jesus here as he concludes this summary of temple challenges from the religious leaders. As the earlier conflicts unfolded, we saw who they hate. They hate the Lord Jesus and want to destroy him. In this short teaching we see who and what they like and love — and it isn't God. In fact, the affections of the heart are a key to tying this up. The final challenge in v 28 ended with Jesus restating of the Greatest Commandment and the Second Greatest Commandment. The Greatest included four “alls” — I am to love God with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind, and all my strength. The Second, I am to love my neighbor as myself.

Mark 12:³⁸ And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹ and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹ And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

PRAY

Beware

We begin in v 38 with the Lord's serious warning about a significant threat. It's a reminder that his people are not immune to danger or peril or suffering. I doubt anyone is surprised by this.

- There are direct threats from Satan and his minions. **1 Peter 5:8** says, “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” **Ephesians 6** tells us Satan strategically plans out ways to destroy us, to quench our faith. God has given us the spiritual armor listed there to victoriously defend against his attacks.

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- There are attacks from outside the Church, such as Rome waged against believers in the first century. Nero the Roman Emperor tortured Christians, arrested and drug them away to be killed for the entertainment of Rome, and wrapped and covered them with tar and lit them on fire. In the middle east today Muslim militants behead believers. In North Korea, the government imprisons and kills those who follow Christ.

From the opening of his ministry, as he preached the Sermon on the Mount, he told us that persecution and suffering would mark the lives of his followers. But note that his warning is not about the devil, or Rome, or enemies from outside. It is a warning about those inside — the teachers and theologians responsible for teaching God's people God's word and God's ways.

The Scribes

The Scribes are the theologians and teachers of God's people, as we have noted earlier. They are men of letters, scholars, highly respected, highly sought after by those who like to be seen with people who like to be seen. If a scribe were to enter your place of business you would be expected to stand in deference when they entered.

Now I said that understanding the affections of the heart are a key to getting a hold of this passage. These respectable, well-educated scribes are now having their affections — the things that drive them, their motives — revealed by the Lord, and those things will be contrasted to the affections of a no-name poverty-stricken widow with no status, no social standing, and no education, no nothing. Here is what Jesus says about the heart-level motivation of these Scribes:

- They like to walk around in long robes. Think of these like scholars' robes. They were extravagant prayer shawls — white, long and flowing, signaling prestige. It displayed their credentials — a sign that they were smarter and more spiritual than you.
- They like greetings in the marketplaces. They like public recognition and being appreciated as they are announced at any venue they enter.
- They like to have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts. They would have always been at the head table on the platform at the Mayor's Breakfast, or at the thousand-dollar-a-plate banquet. It was considered an act of piety to provide for these teachers, so rich people loved to trot them out at dinner parties to show them off in front of their guests.

As theologians and teachers of God's people, their substantial education was to equip them to help God's people love and serve him. But somewhere along the way, things have gone completely off the rails. Maybe they started with good motives, but the seduction of position and recognition has taken

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them 180° from where they began. Or perhaps at the beginning they calculated that being a teacher or pastor was a respectable career with great honor. However they got there, a deadly root of pride has gone unchecked and has strangled any spiritual life or usefulness completely out of them. Jesus in a similar warning in Matthew 6 describes their heart motives and affections as being that they love to be praised by others. They love their self-importance. They love men's applause.

Though trained to help God's people know God and love him, having been consumed by pride they are completely useless for that purpose and are preying on God's people as enemies from within.

- They devour widows' houses. Widows and orphans are among the most vulnerable in society and are to receive a high level of protection and care from God's people. Indeed, you will remember that **James 1:27** says Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. A common prophetic theme in Isaiah 10, Amos 2, and Micah 3 warns that widows and orphans are not to be taken advantage of. As the scribes lived off the generosity and philanthropy of others, it is conceivable that they would show up in someone's home and expect to be taken care of. It would be one thing to go to a wealthy man's house and expect a steak dinner. It's an entirely different matter to go into the poverty-stricken home of a widow and expect the same. It shows a profound lack of love and concern for the people of God, that they are to be shepherding and protecting and teaching.
- For a pretense they make long prayers. Note that the issue isn't the length of the prayer, but the pretense. They want to be thought well of in their praying. "Honey, do see if you can get Rabbi Hillel to pray the invocation at the awards banquet. He's so poetic in the way he says thanks." "Oh, I see Master Yehuda here this morning. Master, would you favor us with a prayer." Whether prayers are short or long, it is certain that if the audience of that prayer is anyone except Holy God, it is a worthless use of words. And lofty words from lips with unconfessed sin are rejected by the One who sits in a high and holy place and sees and knows the hearts of all men.

However religious they are, however well they are thought of by others, however poetic their prayers, they do not love God — they violate the Greatest Commandment by loving themselves, and they are hurting the people of God. They will receive the greater condemnation. This should be a frightening thing for all those who would undertake to lead God's people. He knows our hearts, our motives, and he takes seriously the care and shepherding of his people.

All of this is in the context of a serious warning from the Lord that applies to us. These people were not just present in the first century. They are a constant cancer in the life of the church. You don't

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have to be a very serious researcher to find a boatload of them in our day. TV and social media have given them a platform and attention that first century scribes would have salivated over.

How can God's people be on guard against such wolves? To start with, academic credentials do not a pastor make. I am not anti-intellectual. I want the guy to replace me to be well trained and very smart – smarter than me. Formal academic training is needed now as much as ever. But the presence of diplomas does not overcome a lack of character. A summa cum laude graduate does not equate to a converted heart that loves God above all else. This is why Paul put so much emphasis on the character of Pastor-Elders in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. If a man is more concerned about how he is treated and respected, if his focus and energy seem to be **out there** rather than **in here**, in the sheep pen, he's not gonna help you. He's going to hurt you. Beware of such men.

Now Mark beautifully contrasts these self-loving devourers of widows with a widow who is consumed with love for God above all else.

Jesus is here observing worship in the temple across from the temple treasury in the Court of Women. The giving of financial gifts is an integral part of worship itself. God's people give to support the needs of worship, teaching, and mission. The tithe of the Old Testament was the priority of their income. It came off the top, not what was left after expenses were paid. That mindset helped them, and us, understand that God's kingdom takes priority over earthly agendas.

As he is observing, he notes that there are many wealthy people who put in large sums of money. It may seem odd to us, but a Priest was likely attending the offering boxes, checking and recording the gifts as they were given. The gift would've simply been spoken out loud. Anyone standing in the area would have known the amount and the purpose. Think of it like standing in line to check out at the grocery store. If someone is standing behind you when you get ready to pay, they would hear the checker announce the total. So people with deep pockets, if you will, have reached in and pulled out chunks of change that sound like big. Then comes this widow. Imagine standing in the area and hearing, "Nicodemus of Jerusalem, \$10,000." "Joshua Bar Joseph, \$27,500." And so on with significant gifts. As you noticed the well-heeled people in the line you see someone who is not wearing designer clothes. Her hair may not be well coiffed, and you and everyone else realize she is not a person of means. It may will be that if the priest recorded her gift, he just said it quietly, and possibly just gestured for her to move on to the offering box without even saying anything. There's no

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indication that there was an effort to shame her. But you can even imagine the difference in sound between someone dumping hundreds of dollars of silver coins in versus someone dropping a couple of pennies. It is not the large gifts that the Lord points out, or makes an eternal object lesson out of. The most famous contribution that has ever been made in the history of mankind was made by this with a woman who gave all she had.

Jesus does not condemn the rich people who put in large sums. What he does say is that what they put in came out of an abundance that they had. In other words, what they were dropping in was not fundamentally changing their financial situation. They gave out of their abundance. It didn't hurt. But this woman put in everything she had, all she had to live on. Her act of worship fundamentally changed everything about her financial situation. And Jesus said that what she put in was more significant than all of those who were contributing.

Jesus uses the love and worship of this woman to teach a critical lesson about the economy of God's kingdom. First, where the scribes hated Jesus, but loved the praise of men, this woman seems to not care anything about the praise of men, but loves God. The amount she put in was negligible — two of the smallest coins in circulation. She is unconcerned about comparing her gift to anyone else's. Her concern is that God's Kingdom is the priority of her life. She loves God.

Second, the economy of God's kingdom is fundamentally different than the economy of the world. In God's divine finances, what she gave is greater than the vast sums of wealth from everyone else put together. The priest sitting with the register might have thought that the big numbers would really gain the applause of God. But God was present at the treasury, and he wasn't looking at the digits on the check; he was looking at the devotion of the heart. He was looking at what drove this woman, what she loved. 2 Chronicles 16:9 — “the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him. God doesn't applaud the total of the check, but the cost to the giver. What she gave cost her **all**, and that was simply an outward sign that she understood what it was to love the Lord with **all** the heart, **all** the soul, **all** the mind, and **all** the strength. What an incredible contrast Mark gives us! The love of men versus the love of God!

To love the Lord with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength... This is what being a Christian is. Being a Christian is not an appearance to be made, an argument to be won, or a doctrine to be correctly understood. Being a Christian means loving and obeying the Savior with no carve-outs. Certainly

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doctrine correctly reveals who God is. But if all we do is gain an Orthodox education and head knowledge of God, we remain “not far from the kingdom of God,” but not in.

Lastly, let's consider Jesus himself as he presents these contrasting people.

If we were in a group or class setting, the teacher might ask what you notice about Jesus in both scenarios. It probably wouldn't take very long for someone to say he sees, and knows the hearts of both the scribes, and the widow. There is nothing hidden from his sight. As we saw at the end of John two and our small group study, he knows the hearts of men. At once, this should stir up both fear in us and great comfort. **Great fear because all of our sinfulness is laid bare before him.** We might be able to fool each other, because man looks on the outside. But God looks on the heart. There is nothing hidden from his sight. **But also great comfort.** The one who sees and knows everything about us is the One who came down in the form of man to pay the full penalty for every bitter thought, every evil deed, every sin of omission, every sin of commission, every failure to love God, with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and all of our strength — He took on himself the entirety of sin for all those who turn to him for salvation, believing on him. There is no secret sin hidden from his eyes. There is no sin so great that his atoning blood cannot cleanse it. There is no transgressive debt that has earned the pouring out of God's wrath that Jesus has not absorbed and exhausted it.

2 Questions to Close:

Whose applause are you seeking? Is it more important that people appreciate you and think well of you as opposed to loving the God who knows everything about you? Does it feed something in you when people seek you out? There is nothing objectively wrong with being sought out or having wonderful gifts that can be used. Proverbs tells us a man's gifts and talents make a way for him. But take a warning from the scribes who were gifted and well trained. At some point they became more confident in their gifts than their God. Their love of the applause of dusty men quenched and conquered their love for eternal God. Guard your heart. Direct your heart to love God above all else.

What are you trusting? The widow held nothing back. She didn't hedge her bets. She did not temper her love for God. She was all in, believing that God, according to his word, would not leave her begging for bread but provide what she needed. Don't ration your faith, pouring out a partial measure here, or exercising a little faith there, if you think you can spare it. Go all in. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Watch God provide and hear God applaud. Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that

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he rewards those who diligently seek him. Go in hot pursuit after God. Seek first his Kingdom. Let your love for him be without reserve. God will not fail you. He cannot.

PRAY