



Mark 12:35-44
Sources of Greatness

Summary: You can miss what God is doing if you're looking for the wrong thing.

The title of this morning's message is Sources of Greatness, but I almost changed it to: How to Ruin Christmas and I'll tell you why. As we finish Mark chapter 12 Jesus shows that people often miss the main point because they're looking for the wrong thing. God is doing something but they can't see it because they're looking down and in, instead of looking up and out.

And that is exactly how we ruin Christmas too, by looking down and in instead of up and out. We can allow Christmas to become all about us, so that what we want becomes the driving force of the season. And yes, on one level, that means what you're asking for for Christmas – if I don't get this thing I want, Christmas will be ruined.

How many of us have had the Great Christmas Disappointment where you wanted and wanted the one thing and didn't receive it? It's almost a universal experience. For me it was the Star Wars AT-AT walker, it was \$99 in the Sears Christmas Catalog and I wanted it bad, but never got it because my parents didn't have that kind of money to spend on toys. Sure, I got other things instead, but I didn't get the big thing I really wanted and brought an unnecessary measure of disappointment into what should have been a season of gratitude and thanks.

But focusing on gifts is not the only way we ruin Christmas. Adults often ruin Christmas with our expectations of moments and memories. There's a certain ideal we want to experience. We want things to look a certain way and feel a certain way. We want to do things a certain way, and we want specific people there, smiling, and a nice picture of it all happening.

None of those things are bad at surface level, it's OK to want a certain gift, it's OK to want nice family photos, it's OK to want all the kids – even the grown kids – to be gathered in the living room in their pajamas on Christmas morning. Most of what we want is not inherently bad, but it's not the main point – the main point of Christmas is celebrating that God came to us. In mercy. In kindness. Jesus left a throne in heaven and allowed two young hands to wrap Him in swaddling cloths and lay him in a manger.

The truth of that moment, and what it means for us, is the rock-solid foundation on which we build everything else about Christmas. But if we're not careful, we can lose sight of what's down there supporting all the festivities. And then we become disappointed when Christmas doesn't do what we wanted it to do for us – *because we can't see that the main point is what already happened.*

I say all of this about Christmas because it's the same problem we'll see in Mark – people missing the main point because they're looking for the wrong things. Read with me and we'll see three ways people miss the main point and hopefully learn to avoid them ourselves.

Mark 12:35 Then Jesus answered and said, while He taught in the temple, “How is *it* that the scribes say that the Christ is the Son of David? 36 For David himself said by the Holy Spirit:

*‘The LORD said to my Lord,
“Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”’ (Ps 110:1)*

37 Therefore David himself calls Him ‘Lord’; how is He *then* his Son?
And the common people heard Him gladly.

The section of Scripture we're looking at this morning divides into three sections and in each one you'll see a contrast – you'll see people who seem to have power and position are actually doing the wrong thing or looking for the wrong thing. Jesus is being subversive, blowing up and exposing the current systems of status because they're built on the wrong foundations, they've been built by people looking down and in instead of up and out, built by the kinds of people who love celebrating Christmas but honestly don't know much about Jesus.

If you're taking notes this morning the first thing Jesus points out is:

Greatness is not found in political power

Perhaps you remember that we're looking at the final days of Jesus' life, it's Passover season for them, just like it's Christmas season for us. It was a nationwide event centered in the city of Jerusalem. Jesus is in town staying with friends and each day He comes into the Temple and starts teaching the people who are there.

While He's out in public, different groups are coming up asking questions, trying to make Him slip up and say something they can use against Him but He keeps giving impressive answers to their trickiest questions. Now, He has a question of His own.

He asks why the scribes, who are experts in what the Scripture says and what it means, kind of like religious lawyers, why do they say that the Christ would be a son of David when David seems to recognize that the Christ is greater than himself? It's probably not a question you've ever thought about. And that's OK. I'll do my best to explain it.

David is the most famous king of Israel. He was a political ruler but also a military commander. He defeated Israel's enemies and secured and advanced their borders. The nation enjoyed both prosperity and independence under his leadership. He was generally a very righteous and godly man as well, with one major exception, and he wrote many of the

Psalms including the famous 23rd Psalm which speaks of the Lord as our Shepherd and Ps 110:1 which Jesus quotes from here.

In Psalm 110 David speaks of another, more significant, ruler who will come one day. He says God will use this person in even greater ways than He used David. God will conquer the enemies of this person and place them under His feet. This coming ruler's power and status will be so much greater than David's – the greatest king that Israel ever had, that David calls him [my lord](#).

There's an echo here of what John the Baptist said about Jesus. John was the most famous religious man in Israel for a time, crowds came out to hear him preach and to be baptized by him. People said he was the first genuine prophet sent by God in over 400 years. But John spoke of someone coming who would be so much greater than he was that John wasn't worthy even to stoop down and tie this person's sandals.

Imagine Warren Buffet saying there's someone coming who knows so much about investing that I'm not even worthy of giving advice. Imagine Tom Brady saying there's a quarterback coming that's going to make me look like a third string backup on the freshman squad. Or imagine Elon Musk saying there's someone coming who's going to make me look like a kid building rockets and cars out of Legos in my parent's basement.

When someone on that level makes a statement like this, you get a sense of how great the coming person's greatness must be. And that is why people were waiting so anxiously for the Christ, or the Messiah as He would have been called in Hebrew.

At this point, things were bad in Israel. The nation had fallen on hard times since David's rule. They suffered a tragic civil war that split the country in two. They suffered multiple invasions and conquests by surrounding powers. The city of Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed. They had been attempting to rebuild for years now but every time they made some progress it seemed another invader would show up on their borders.

When Jesus walked the streets, the nation was under Roman occupation and the Temple was still under construction. It wouldn't be completed for another 30 years after His death. Even then, it stood complete for less than ten years before the Romans destroyed it in 70 AD. It has never been rebuilt, though there are those in Israel who would love to do so but now you've got this complicating factor that Muslims have built the Dome of the Rock there.

Perhaps now you can understand why the scribes were teaching the people to wait, hope, and pray for the day when the Christ would appear and restore the greatness of Israel under David. That was a good hope – it was grounded in Scripture. They got that idea from the Bible.

But they missed something important – this coming Christ would be great because God was working to establish His kingdom. Notice,

[The LORD said to my Lord,](#)

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*“Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”’*

This is what makes Him great – the fact that He receives and rules over a kingdom *established by God.*

The problem is, if God establishes the kingdom, it might not look the way you expected or happen the way you expected – which brings us back to what I said a few minutes ago – I could have titled this message, **How to Ruin Christmas** – because we ruin things when we expect them to be one way and they turn out differently.

Most people in Jesus’ day were looking for the Christ to be a political and military figure who would lead an insurgency that would drive out the Romans, secure Israel’s borders, strengthen her economy, and establish the nation as a regional power again.

What they didn’t understand is that the reason Christ was so much greater than David is because He would establish a global kingdom that spanned borders and nationalities and would stand for all time – Christ was coming to establish the Church not simply to reform the nation of Israel.

Today many of us work for the government in some form – either as a direct employee or on a contract. You might be a legislative assistant on Capitol Hill, an analyst, or an officer, or you may be a subcontractor working for the federal government or a school teacher working for the county, but your job is to do something for the government, something funded by taxpayers. And there are some great things about that. Our governments have done some things well and provide valuable, appreciated services.

America is a great nation. Some of you even immigrated here intentionally because you were drawn by our history, values, and opportunities. Those things are kind of dented and dinged right now, but what we’ve got is still better than what you’ll find anywhere else. And we could see greater times again – never give up hope, especially if God sends us revival. It has happened at least three times in our history. It can happen again. So, pray for this nation, and pray for Israel. Pray for God’s protection and providence.

But remember, the reason why we can hope, the reason why we can pray for a better future on earth, is because we know we need more than a new president or chief justice or chairman of the joint chiefs of staff – we need God Himself to intervene through that man or woman. And whether or not He does, whatever God may choose to do with America, He has established an eternal kingdom for Christ and that is where we base our primary identity – in a kingdom that cannot fade, that will not be invaded, that will stand firm and expand as God Himself draws people in.

You see, there was nothing wrong with the scribes encouraging people to look for the Christ. There was nothing wrong with them hoping for a better future for the nation. The problem was only in not appreciating that God was actually doing something far greater.

And so today, we should hope for and work toward a better future for our nation. But in order to keep from ruining Christmas, we need to remember that whatever happens here and now, God is establishing an eternal kingdom and He is putting the enemies of Jesus under His feet.

Well, Jesus has more to say as He corrects our notions of where to look for greatness. It's not to be found in political or military power, nor is it to be found in religious activity. Read with me,

38 Then He said to them in His teaching, "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, *love* greetings in the marketplaces, 39 the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, 40 who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation."

Greatness is not found in religious activity

Let me ask a question – have you ever met someone who seemed very religious, but just didn't impress you, for whatever reason? They might have carried a Bible around or made a big deal about going to church every week. Maybe they loved to talk about some aspect of doctrine. But then they were hard to get along with. Or they were weird. Or they were inconsistent in living things out.

That can happen for several reasons, but what I want you to know is that God knows, He can see it too. Notice, Jesus actually warns people to beware of these religious leaders because for all their effort, energy, and enthusiasm, they're not on the right track.

They're ruining Christmas by missing the point. They're trying to use religion for their own purposes, to achieve their own goals. Notice what Jesus says they love – *being recognized by other people*.

They do all these religious things, and make a show of how spiritual they are, but it's not to gain a greater knowledge of God or a deeper relationship with Him. All the approval, all the recognition they receive *comes from other people*. And if we're not careful, we can fall into the same trap. Friends, Jesus specifically tells His disciples **beware**. That's a warning for a reason.

My friends, the truth is, some of us came in to church today looking for affirmation and approval from other people, hoping to be noticed by other people or hoping to talk to so and so. And some of us look around and pat ourselves on the back because we think we're doing such a good job here, we're really good Christians.

It's not malicious, it's probably not even intentional, but sometimes we do it: we make Sunday morning more about us than it is about God because we love being seen, being noticed, being affirmed for the religious work we're doing, we love being **greeted** by others. Church has even been called the poor man's country club for this very reason.

Jesus says, 'Hey, don't do that.' Don't fall into the trap of comparing yourself to other people. You just *need to know who you are individually before God.*

You need to know that you have value simply because you bear the image of God. You need to know that He has a plan for your life. You need to know that He sent His Son to die in your place as an act of sacrifice so that you could be brought closer to God. You need to know that you have inherent dignity, inherent value, not because of what you have attained or what you rules you follow, or what you drive or what you wear or where you work or what shape your body is in. You need to know that you have an identity and worth that cannot be taken away from you because God has given it to you. So receive that.

So maybe this morning you need to tell God you're tired of trying to wear the right robes the right way. You're tired of trying to pray fancy prayers or whatever it is that you do to be noticed by other people, whatever it is you do to try seem impressive.

Maybe today is the day you need to tell God you're tired of living for the approval of others, and tell Him you want to receive the identity He has for you in Christ. Tell Him you want to live for His good pleasure. You want to be more concerned about what He thinks of you than anyone else. Tell Him you want to live for His recognition and approval. And tell your soul to be still and rest in Him.

Learn to say like David,

Psalm 62:1 Truly my soul silently *waits* for God;
From Him *comes* my salvation.
2 He only *is* my rock and my salvation;
He is my defense;
I shall not be greatly moved.

God is calling you into a relationship where you depend more on Him than on your own achievements – even your own religious achievements. A relationship based on acceptance and approval because of who you are in Christ instead of what you can do and how hard you can try.

Maybe it will help if you think about it this way – Christmas is Christmas because of what Christ has done, not because of how you decorate, or what events or parties you plan, or what you give or get. The true point and purpose of Christmas is done and over, it's established and secure. You don't have to *make it Christmas*. In the same way, you don't have to make yourself religious by wearing the right things the right way, praying the right way, following all the rules and appearing spiritually impressive to everyone. You just need to rest in Jesus.

And, if I can say so, mom and dad – be careful that you're not teaching your kids to be good scribes with the rules and expectations you establish in your home. You might raise some kids that know Scripture, that know how to behave at church, but don't know that's not

what Jesus really wants – He wants a relationship with them, even when they mess up. Church kids need to know that it's not all about rule-keeping and religious performance.

Well, we've seen that we can ruin Christmas and our lives by looking down and in when it comes to politics and religion. There's one more source Jesus confronts and its money and materialism. Notice what He says next:

41 Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many *who were* rich put in much. 42 Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. 43 So He called His disciples to *Himself* and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; 44 for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood."

Greatness is not found in financial success

Remember, Jesus is blowing up our typical way of looking at the world – He's flipping over our usual ways of determining status and what we think makes someone great. Go anywhere you like in the world and it's generally accepted that rich people are better people, especially rich people who give to charitable causes. Oh my goodness, look at the big, generous donor, look what they're doing with their money. And we think we'd like to be that rich person too.

And maybe we even think that way with good motives, Lord, if You would just bless me with some more money, I would love to write big checks and do big things for you. But would you? Are you sure? And even if the answer is yes, you need to know that your giving today could be more impressive to God than your giving would be then. That's what Jesus is pointing out here.

Jesus highly esteems the tiny little gift this woman brings – two pennies in our currency – He esteems it not because of its size, but because of its precious value – she had nothing to live on and yet she made a priority of giving to God.

I saw something similar years ago in a small church in a refugee camp in Northern Uganda - an older woman came walking down the aisle bringing a few bananas as her offering because she had no money but still wanted to surrender something to God.

That kind of worship (and giving is an act of worship) gets God's attention. He wants to be our number one priority and He is far more concerned about that than He is about the amount you drop in the offering box each week.

You won't find it on any anatomy and physiology charts, but there is a direct connection between your **heart** and your **wallet**, and there is another one that goes directly between your heart and your **watch**. The three form a trinity of sorts, where one is, the other two can't be far behind.

The things you give your heart to will also begin to possess your watch, or your time, and your wallet, because money is just another expression of time. Either you have already given away a chunk of your life to earn it, or if you use credit, you are promising away a chunk of your future. We often hear it said that time is money, but it's equally true that money is time – your time, your life.

This is why God wants your heart. If He has that, He knows your wallet and your watch will eventually follow. Jesus even said (Lk 12:34) “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” The little bit of treasure this woman put into the gift box was simply a reflection of the fact that she had **already** given Him her entire heart. If you have a lot, you can give and write it off, it doesn't pinch, it almost doesn't matter. That kind of giving misses the point, it says yeah, sure, I've got something for God too as if you're tipping Him for religious services.

You don't have to be poor to have God recognize your giving, but check your heart - do you still see yourself as wholly dependent upon Him even when giving doesn't hurt? Money is only valuable to God when the direct link to your heart is still intact. If the connection between the two gets severed, God won't care one bit no matter how much you think you are giving to Him.

So, what have we learned this morning? We've seen that things that seem impressive on the outside, or from a distance, can be hollow and worthless and entirely beside the point in the eyes of God. We've seen that it's easy for us to look down and in instead of looking up and out. We've seen that it's possible to have a great big, shiny, festive Christmas and completely miss Christ.

And why have we seen it all? Because Jesus pointed it out. He asked the question about David calling the Christ Lord. He said beware of the scribes and all their religious activities. He pointed out what was really happening in the Temple.

Friends, Jesus wants to make sure you don't miss what's really important in life. Jesus wants to make sure you're looking for the right things, doing the right things, that you're spending your life the right way. Jesus wants you to know that **Greatness is found in alignment with God.**

So, now is your time to spend a moment in prayer. What has God been speaking to you this morning? It's probably one of two things – you either need some correction because you're off course, or you need some encouragement because you're already moving in the right direction. Which is it? What is God ministering to you – it's something that will bring you into greater alignment with Him.

One final thing: the purpose of pointing out Christ's greater kingdom was to help people see what God was doing for them. The purpose of pointing out the faulty religion of the scribes was to help people see that God wasn't asking for all of that and the same thing is true about pointing out the big givers in the Temple. In each case God is saying hey, settle down, it's not all on you to make things happen. I'm here. I'm at work. And I'm inviting you in. So,

come, celebrate Christmas, not because of all the decorations you've hung up and gifts you've bought, but because I've already given the first and best gift to you.

Take a moment and reflect on all this and pray.

Greatness is not found in:
Power
Religion
Money
It's found in alignment with God

Let's pray



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 12:35-44 Sources of Greatness

Summary: You can miss what God is doing if you're looking for the wrong thing.

- Have you experienced the Great Christmas Disappointment? What were you asking for or trying to do?
- Why do we often want God to work in our political structures here and now?
 - o What are some examples of how Christians hope God would work in American politics?
 - o How do we balance working for righteousness and justice today with a focus on the guarantees of the Kingdom of God?
- The scribes were recognized for all their zeal and dedication to keeping religious rules, routines and standards. What actions or activities earn people status, standing or recognition in the church today?
 - o Often these things start off as good ideas or actions, perhaps they're even commanded or encouraged in Scripture, like praying – how do we encourage spiritual disciples and a righteous life without becoming like the scribes?
- Is it true that there is a trinity of sorts between your heart, your watch, and your wallet? Where and how have you seen this play out?
- Why do people give to the church? What principles should guide our giving?
 - o Is there a difference between giving to the local church and giving to another ministry or charity?
 - o What has been your own history of giving? When did you start? What have you learned over time? How do you determine where to give or how much to give?