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Mark 12:28-44

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Forty-seventh Message

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NEW COVENANT EYES

SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE

Last week we proclaimed, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” On this first Sunday after Easter you might be asking, “Now what?” What should we, the Church, be doing now that the work of Christ is finished and God has placed his holy seal on the Son by raising him from the dead, exalting him to his right hand, far above all rule and authority in heaven and on earth? Sadly, many Christians who believe that Christ has granted them a free ticket to heaven feel they have no obligation to do anything. I hope none of you falls into that category. Others of you might well be thinking of Jesus’ post resurrection injunctions to his disciples to evangelize and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18-20). This has indeed been God’s ultimate mission since the creation of the world, first crystallized in the calling of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). But now with the advent of Christ and his defeat of Satan and his evil hordes through the cross, this mission has reached its climactic moment as all races, nationalities and classes are freely welcomed to leave the darkness and walk in the light of God’s rule. I believe many of us have some understanding of the *goal* of this climactic age, but I suspect that few of us fully understand the *means* which God has set in place to achieve that goal.

Earlier this month, three teams from PBCC returned from different missions around the globe: to Liberia, Mexico, and Croatia. Gary Vanderet led a team to Liberia for a pastors conference. This ground-breaking national conference of 500 pastors did not come together as a result of a recent vision from our leaders. It was the culmination of a life of painful suffering, extraordinary sacrifice and dedicated prayer by one man, Gus Marwih. His *life* and his *relationships*, stretching from California to Africa, were the key to this extraordinary conference.

From Africa we turn to Mexico. Andy Drake returned from the dust of Mexicali with a small nation in tow, sealing thirteen years of relationships with a barbecue feast at the newly rebuilt orphanage, Casa Hogar “Nino Feliz,” in downtown Mexicali. My daughter, Katie, who was part of the adult team, commented about the new perspective she gained as a leader from the one she had as a student. Her observation was that rather than engaging in evangelism in the typical way, going door to door to make as many contacts as possible and then leaving, Andy and his team enjoyed a fruitful harvest of over a decade of faithful relationships. Everything comes down to relationships, authentic relationships.

The gospel is meaningless without community. God’s first concern after he had given birth to his people Israel was to instruct them on how to develop communities of *shalom*, based on loving and healthy relationships. The same pattern was repeated in the New Testament. When God poured forth his Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, he did not just save individuals, but rather gave birth to a new community. Because that community was so attractive, Luke reports that “the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Effective evangelism takes place in the context of healthy communities that bear witness to the fact the Messianic age has broken into the present, by the way they conduct their relationships.

Today, after a five-month detour through John’s gospel and Revelation we return to our studies in the Book of the Covenant, found in Exodus 20:18-23:33. This text gives detailed instructions on how the Israelites were to create healthy communities that were to serve as the base for evangelizing the depraved nations around Canaan. Before we resume our studies, I thought it might be helpful to examine a New Testament text where Jesus in his unique way gives us a lens through which we can accurately apply these

Old Covenant laws. Some Christians are near sighted – i.e. they apply these texts close-up and personal, with no sense of their cultural and historical context; others are far sighted – i.e. they treat these laws as dusty relics of a bygone age which have no current relevance to our lives. Some of you may even suffer from an astigmatism in that you often quote texts from both worlds, but you have no idea how they fit together into a coherent whole, and trying to manage both is giving you a headache.

My message title is *New Covenant Eyes*. With Jesus’ lens you will have 20/20 vision and be able to make out fine details at great distances, without compromising the clarity of your close-up vision in the present. Our text, Mark 12:38-44, revolves around three characters: a scribe, a son, and a widow.

I. A Searching Scribe Mark 12:28-34

A. Searching for the Main Thing (12:28-31)

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (12:29 NIV)

Our story takes place in the midst of five stories¹ of controversy between Israel’s leadership and Jesus. These encounters occur after Jesus had cleansed the temple and pronounced judgment on the nation’s leaders. He was challenged, first, by the Pharisees and the Herodians on the matter of paying taxes to Caesar, and second, by the Sadducees on the doctrine of the resurrection. Jesus skillfully silences all three parties by his amazing handling of the Hebrew Scriptures. His hearers are left with an uncompromising clarity on the way of the cross and the resurrection.

Now out of the dust of debate there emerges a scribe who is dissatisfied with religious rhetoric. Though Matthew indicates that this man’s question was designed to put Jesus to the test, it appears he longs to get at the heart of spirituality. His enquiry is central to everything. What is the most important commandment? Tom Wright captures the force of this question with an illustration:

If the house is on fire, what will you grab as you escape? Your children, of course, if they can’t walk themselves. Your wallet. Your computer. Your passport and personal documents. A precious photograph. The wrist-watch your grandfather gave you. A stack of letters from someone you love dearly. You look on from a safe distance as everything else is burnt to ashes. You realize the significance of what you’ve just done. You have made some important choices... The question the lawyer asked Jesus was like that. Faced with the whole volume of Jewish law, which commandment really matters? Which one will your grasp on to in a moment of crisis? And what is the significance of that choice?²

Over the centuries, Israel’s scribes had attempted to come to terms with that very question by meticulously counting the total number of individual statutes (613, 363 negative and 248 positive) within the law and then differentiating between those that were “heavy” and those that were “light.” Wessel further explains,

The rabbis also made attempts to formulate great principles from which the rest of law could be deduced. The most famous example comes from Hillel, who (in about 20 A.D.) when challenged by a Gentile, “Make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the whole law while I stand on one foot,” replied, “What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole law, the rest is commentary. Go learn it.”³

Jesus' answer is different from Hillel's. He takes the positive slant, quoting the heart of the law, found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (12:29-31 NIV)

This commandment sums up the two most basic tenets of Israel's theology, monotheism and election. “There is one God, and Israel is His people” (N. T. Wright). It speaks of the integrity of God's person and Israel's unique relationship to him. The concept of God being “one” is best understood relationally: there is no division in God's inner character. He has complete integrity. There is no division in who he is, what he says, or what he does. When God makes a commitment to man, that is what drives salvation history no matter what the cost.

God's integrity (his “oneness”) becomes the basis for the foremost commandment: mankind, in response to this gift of salvation, is to love God with his whole heart. The idea of “heart” encompasses all that is hidden and inaccessible within – the totality of one's inner life. That one phrase would have been sufficient to express the idea of totality, but the Hebrew text in Deuteronomy adds two more emphatic uses of the word “all” to drive the point home: “*all your soul, and all your strength.*” To these three Jesus adds a fourth note, “*with all your mind.*” The point could not be more emphatic. Because God is one, man must give him all his affections, with no division in his heart. That is the driving force of all religion. Religion is not about knowing about God or being a scholar, but loving God from the heart. God longs for lovers.

But then, Jesus doesn't stop there; he adds a second, from Leviticus 19:18, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” The importance of this word cannot be overstated. Jesus is saying that loving God means loving one's neighbor, in whose image the neighbor is made. The two do not come into conflict, nor do they exist in isolation. Worship must precede ethics, but it never negates ethics or leaves us isolated from community. Full-throated praise must be echoed with wipe-open arms. The stronger one's spirituality, the stronger one's passion to reach out and care for others with total abandon must be. As the climactic song in *Les Misérables* asserts, “To love another person is to see the face of God.” Jesus' final statement, “There is no other commandment greater than these,” inseparably seals the two into one; it is a marriage of divine proportions. What God has joined together let not man separate.

This picture suggests that the essence of spirituality is the complete integration of mind and heart, heaven and earth. Thus the divine intention behind every Old Testament law was a devotion to God that reached out to all mankind with infinite care and compassion.

B. Joy in the Main Thing (12:32-33)

“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (12:32-33)

Unlike his colleagues, this scribe expresses his admiration for Jesus' answer. With uncanny insight he adds that these essentials mean much more to the heart of God than burnt offerings and sacrifices. That is an amazing statement from a Jew standing inside the temple precincts just before Passover. This was what David discovered a thousand years earlier (Ps 51:15-17), and was emphasized over and over again by Israel's sages and prophets.⁴ This scribe knew deep down that the whole sacrificial system was symbolic of deeper realities of the heart, and if those were not understood, rituals meant nothing (Ps 50:7-15).

C. Close but not yet in (12:34)

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. (12:34)

Jesus is impressed that this is an honest man who is also spiritually sensitive. So with honesty and forthrightness Jesus responds, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” His answer amazes everyone, not only for its positive affirmation, but also its undisclosed mystery: “not far.” The man was close, but he was not yet “in.” He was “not far” from the kingdom because he had faith to see the essentials in the law. He knew that loving God and man with the whole heart meant everything, but he was not yet in because he was not yet aware that he was standing in front of the King who was about to inaugurate a new covenant. As Jeremiah predicted:

“I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them *singleness of heart and action* (lit. “*one heart and one way*”), so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them.” (Jer 32:37-39; cf. Ezek 11:19)

With the advent of the New Covenant, the law would be written on human hearts, with the result that the people of God would have an undivided heart. At the same time the sacrificial system would become outdated and redundant. True faith means not only being spiritually sensitive to the scriptures we study, but also to what God is doing in the present. God is dynamic. He is not static. A Jew with real faith knew that his religion was not merely symbolic, it was also typological, meaning that Israel's religion was not only a shadow of heavenly realities, it was also “prophetic,” pointing forward to a day when those realities would come to earth. On that day the shadows would be done away. Thus, if one is “not far from the kingdom of God,” the eschatological moment is near: the King is present and about to inaugurate his kingdom. It's one thing to know what life is about; it's quite another to get on the train and go where it is going.

With that answer the awestruck crowd is silenced. There are no more questions for this King. Now, from out of the silence, Jesus poses a question to bridge the chasm between those who are “close” and those who are “in.”

II. A Royal Riddle: David's Son Mark 12:35-37a

While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, “How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

**“The Lord said to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet.”**

David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?” (12:35-37a)

So who is Israel's Messiah king? Of course, the universal answer given by the scribes was, “the son of David” (2 Sam 7:12-14; Isa 11:1,10; Jer 23:5). To that biblically correct answer Jesus now adds another text, one that the rabbis rarely used with regard to the Messiah, Psalm 110. Jesus says, “You call him son of David, but when David saw him exalted at God's right hand, he called him Lord.” “Yahweh said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand...’” And David spoke this by the Holy Spirit.⁵ This is God-inspired scripture. So, if he is David's Lord, in what sense can he be his son? How can someone who is junior in age in some mysterious way be superior in rank?

Could it be that David was given a vision of one of his descendants exalted to the place of such high honor that only the title “Lord” would be appropriate? And when David caught the vision, he worshipped his future son as his King and Lord. Does that re-define what sonship means? Jesus is never bothered by theological tensions. Pushing the theological envelope past orthodox boundaries does not concern him. Psalm 110 radically redefines what sonship in Israel would mean. David goes on to say that this new king will also be “a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” That means the future king “will supersede the present high-priestly regime (cf. Zech 3:1-4:14).”⁶ Jesus has already declared that the temple will be destroyed and its sacrifices replaced; now with this text he adds that the priesthood will be superseded as well. In declaring that he is David's son and Israel's true King, he is saying that there will be a lot of unemployed priests in Jerusalem.

But this vision of the Son is essential to entry into the kingdom of God. Without it we remain nearsighted almost to the point of blindness. It is not enough to know the essence of what God requires; we must also see that Christ has fulfilled all these requirements. He is a king who is also our sacrifice, a king who is our high priest, a king who writes the law on human hearts, and a king who by his death and resurrection is now exalted at the right hand of God. This is a king for whom there is no title worthy other than Lord. Once you have a vision of that king in the scriptures your faith moves you to worship.

Several years ago when our children were little, we took a family vacation at Black Butte Ranch in Oregon. One day a downpour drenched the landscape and left a large meadow dotted with puddles, that now under the bright sunlight mirrored the massive cumulous clouds in the blue sky like a Monet painting. I called my youngest daughter over to observe this extraordinary sight. I said, "Katie, look down at the puddles and tell me what you see." She came right up to one of the puddles, looked straight down into it and replied, "I see mud." "No, Katie, move back and look at the puddles at an angle in the distance, then tell me what you see." She lifted up her gaze slightly and exclaimed, "I see heaven!" Such are the disparate views we get looking into the law, depending on which "lens" we look through. On the one hand, the law can be a mirror of our own sin, condemning us with guilt and discouragement. But on the other hand, when we view the law through the lens of Christ, and see that he has fulfilled all that it requires, we find the life of heaven filling our soul. With joyous praise we sing with John Bunyan,

Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands.
Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings.

Now we are in a place to act, not depending on ourselves but trusting his resources within us to be our adequacy.

Next, Mark changes our focus from a searching scribe and an exalted son to hypocritical scribes and an extravagant widow.

III. An Extravagant Widow Mark 12:37b-44

A. Devouring Widows (12:37b-40)

The large crowd listened to him with delight. As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely." (12:37b-40)

Jesus now takes this opportunity before a great and captive audience to deliver them from religious exploitation. Ezekiel predicted that God would one day send a new David to deliver his sheep from oppressive shepherds (Ezek 34). That day had now come. Right there in the temple, Jesus publicly unmask Israel's scribes for the hypocrites they are. He says they do not serve for love of God or for the sheep, but for the honor and prestige which religion bestows. They love to lengthen their prayer shawls to show how learned they are. It's one thing to wear a multi-colored scarf at graduation, but quite another to go parading around in it every day at the mall! But this is what the scribes did, bestowing upon themselves an air of respectability as they strutted around the marketplace. They also loved the deference they received by occupying the choicest seats on every occasion.

Despite their outward show of piety, however, underneath they were oppressive and brutal. In Old Testament times, teachers of the law were not allowed to receive payment for their services, making them dependent on gifts from patrons. But greedy teachers abused the system by preying on the generous hospitality of widows. Once they became ingratiated with their prey they would not hesitate to devour their estates and cover up their crimes with long public prayers. Jesus says their judgment will be severe (cf. Jas 3:1ff).

From the image of "devouring widows," Mark turns our focus to a "worshipping widow."

B. A Worshipping Widow (12:41-44)

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on." (12:41-44)

Taking his seat opposite the treasury, Jesus observes the spectacle before him. The "treasury" is probably a reference to "the thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles which, according to the Mishnah, were placed against the wall of the Court of Women."⁷ As he is sitting there, the crowds press forward to contribute their gifts to the temple. Each contribution resounded with a loud clanging noise as the coins were thrown into the trumpet-like receptacles. Everyone knew when the rich made their weighty deposits, because the noise would ring out across the entire court.

Into this scene comes a poor widow. Her poverty could very well have come about because the scribes had devoured her estate. Yet she is not bitter. She hasn't come to the temple for justice, but to worship. Pressing forward, she throws in two *lepta*, the smallest coins in circulation, about 1/8 of a cent apiece.⁸ They barely make a trumpet sound. She had but two coins. She could have kept one, but she threw in both, which consisted of her very life, for she loved God with her whole heart and gave him her complete adoration. Such faith so deeply touches Jesus he hurriedly calls his disciples to instruct them about her faith. To their surprise they learn that she, not the rich, was the greatest contributor to the treasury.

What moves God is not the amount of the gift but the amount of trust and love which the gift symbolizes. The gifts of the rich were not burdensome to them. What were they but a generous tip taken out of their surpluses? The poor widow's gift, although tiny, was symbolic of her complete surrender to God. With those two weightless coins she cast herself wholly into the arms of God. Her glowing example, though nameless and small, has motivated more selfless giving to the kingdom than all the wealth of the rich.

IV. A Scribe, a Son and a Widow Give Us "New Covenant Eyes"

As we reflect on the stories of the scribe, the son and the widow, perhaps we can construct a lens for understanding these Old Testament laws. With the scribe, we see that the driving force behind all of God's laws was not religious dogma, but relationships: loving God and our neighbor with the whole heart. That's the bottom line.

But even with that clear mandate we are not yet "in the kingdom of God" until we get a vision of the Son who became King. We must first see that everything God requires of us he has already provided in David's greater Son. The Son who became our sacrifice and is now exalted as our advocate high priest has made that holy temple our playground. We are fully accepted just as we are. He is not ashamed to call us brothers. This means that we are sons! It is when we hear the Father's voice crying "son!" into our hearts that we are able to worship like this widow with outrageous, abandoned love. So a widow's holy action, a rare sight in the temple under the Old Covenant, should become commonplace in the community of the New Covenant. Have you ever been touched by such a "widow"?

Four weeks ago I took my place inside a new seminary facility in Osijek, Croatia and looked out over twenty-five third- and fourth-year students. It was an idyllic dream for me to think about having two full weeks to teach future pastors and leaders in Eastern Europe the texts I love the most, David's Psalms, especially since the school sat directly opposite a former synagogue. Yet I had no idea of the painstaking work that lay ahead. Many of the buildings in the city of Osijek are still blanketed with bullet holes, a painful reminder of the recent war. The students at the seminary were the products

of decades of distrust and hatred between the countries they represented – Macedonia, Albania, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia. Some did not trust Americans, others seemed isolated or lonely, and a few disillusioned. The faculty had sacrificed much to serve in this war-torn country; it was difficult for me to comprehend all the responsibilities they had to carry. How could we hope to make an impact on this community in a mere two weeks? It was like trying to plant a vineyard in a field laden with centuries of rubble.

But with a wonderful team we decided pour out our love on them. We started by canceling one of the afternoon sessions and substituted two movie nights, followed by some humorous skits. While I rested after lectures, the rest of the team took students out one by one for coffee to listen to their stories. At night we would take one or two out to dinner and have fellowship and communion with them to remind them how precious they were before God. The second week we “kidnapped” four of the couples and sent them off to a nice hotel for a romantic overnight stay (most had never had a honeymoon). By the end of the second week the question still remained: Would they actually give voice to their souls in their personal psalm they were supposed to write? Several objected that if they had to write an honest poem, they did not want to share it publicly with the group because they didn't feel safe.

Then that dreaded night arrived. We gathered in the Mennonite Room at 8 o'clock. After a prolonged silence we began to hear the “authentic voice” of these dear students. Much of their pain centered on the recent war: “It was 1991 when the war began. I was five years old...” Out it came: pent up pain, torrid confusion and secluded suffering, all couched in tender vulnerability and risky honesty.

I'll never forget Ivan Balženka. After Serbian bombs destroyed her house, she was forced to take refuge with her family in a dark, miserable basement for the duration of the war. As she tells her story...

For three years there was no food, no warmth and no ability to wash. Suddenly, one day all the shooting stopped. Relief flooded our hearts. But the wonderful silence was broken by the raucous voices of soldiers invading what remained of our house. They ordered us out of the basement, lined us up against the wall, and said they were going to shoot us because we had not fought with them in the war. I closed my eyes, waiting to die. Was it all going to end this way? But as I stood there a voice rang out, “Don't shoot! I worked with them before the war. They did fight.” It was a lie, but this man, like Jesus, risked his life to identify with us in order to save us. When we looked around our accusers left and hot tears streamed down my filthy face. After a few minutes we peeled ourselves off from the wall. So thankful to Jesus, we were free.

I began my new life. It was like spring. I met a handsome young officer, fell in love, got married and had a little girl. But it was not long before I realized I knew very little about my husband. Then the internal war started. I discovered that he already had a wife and children in another town, and several other girlfriends. I fled to my parents' home with my daughter, where I felt safe, but my husband begged me to return. After I refused again and again, he entered my parents' home, pulled a bomb out of his pocket and through it into the middle of the room. I found myself staring at death once more. Rescue came again, but at a price. My father threw himself on the bomb; his body became our protective shield. He lost both his legs, but he saved my life and the life of my little girl. He now lives in a wheelchair, full of pain, but his spirit is full of joy because his daughter and granddaughter were saved from destruction, and I became my father's legs, taking him wherever he needed to go.

My father's love reminds me of the greatest love this world has ever known. Jesus Christ threw himself on my sin, and now I am his legs, hands and mouth telling everyone of his love.

After several more hours of similar stories and poems, we partook in Holy Communion as a new community. As Ivan held the cup of the New Covenant in her hands, she said that with Jesus in her heart she felt like she was finally at the place where she could forgive her husband. As she served me the cup, I think I came a bit closer to feeling those hot tears of the Son when they peeled him off the tree.

1 Note the *chiastic* structure of these five stories:

a The reluctant *giving* of taxes to Caesar

b The *resurrection* debate

x The greatest commandment: loving God and neighbor

b' The Son of David *exalted*: Psalm 110

a' The extravagant *giving* of a widow to God

2 Tom Wright, *Mark For Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 169-170.

3 Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:736-737.

4 See 1 Sam 15:22; Isa 1:11-18; 43:22-24; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8; Ps 50:7-15; Prov 15:8; 21:27; 28:9.

5 On the inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit, see Acts 1:16; 4:25; 28:25; Heb 3:7; 9:8; 10:15; 2 Tim 3:16, and 2 Pet 1:21.

6 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 509.

7 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 386.

8 Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 729, adds: “They amount to no more than a quadrans (the smallest Roman coin, worth 1/144 of a denarius before Nero's devaluation of the denarius, 1/64 of a denarius after his devaluation, a denarius being the daily wage of a manual laborer in Matt 20:1-16). In defining two lepta as ‘a quadrans,’ Mark uses a Latin loan word to make sure his Roman audience do not miss the seeming smallness of the gift, which will make Jesus' comment the more startling in its power to upset popularly held opinion.”

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