



A SCRIBE, A SON, AND A WIDOW

Catalog No. 1136

Mark 12:28-44

35th Message

Brian Morgan

November 14th, 1999

We have begun to look at five stories¹ of controversy in Mark's gospel between Israel's leadership and Jesus. These encounters come after Jesus has cleansed the temple and pronounced judgment on the nation's leaders. In our last study we examined the opening two stories. Jesus 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 silenced all three parties by his amazing recourse to the Hebrew scriptures, leaving his hearers with an uncompromising clarity on the way of the cross and resurrection. The next three stories, built around three characters, a scribe, a son, and a widow, take a dramatic turn, from the negative to the positive, and from group debate to individual encounter. These three brief cameos capture the essence of our faith. Together they trace our spiritual journey, how we proceed from study, to worship, to action. If you are the kind of person who wants to quickly get to the bottom line, this text is for you.

I. A Searching Scribe (12:28-34)

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

And one of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall 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, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (NASB)

From the dust of debate emerges a scribe seeking to cut through the theological quagmire and get to the heart of things. His question is honest, apt, and central to everything. Jesus must have been encouraged by his honesty. In the midst of all the arrogant posturing and moral complacency that was going on, here was one who longed for the truth. Instead of placing Jesus on the defensive over some doctrinal issue, this man asks what is the most important commandment. Given the length and complexity of the whole law, this is something every good teacher should know. Wessel comments:

The rabbis counted 613 individual statutes in the law, 365 which were negative and 248 positive. Attempts were made to differentiate between the "heavy," or

"great," and the "light," or "little," commandments. The rabbis also made attempts to formulate great principles from which the rest of the law could be deduced. The most famous example comes from Hillel, who 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 and learn.'²

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

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

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" (Wright). It speaks of the undividedness of God and Israel's unique relationship to him. The concept of God being "one" is best understood relationally: there is no division in God's character. He has complete integrity. There is no division in who he is or what he says. When God makes a commitment to man, that is what drives history, no matter what the cost. This was the commandment that God gave after he had saved Israel from bondage in Egypt, in fulfillment to his promise to give Abraham a seed and a land.

The fact of God's oneness becomes the basis for the foremost commandment: that man, in response to this gift of salvation, love God with his whole heart. The Hebrew 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.*" Jesus quotes the Greek translation, which added a fourth tone, "*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 Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes to on quote from Leviticus 19:18, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" The importance of this cannot be overstated.

Jesus is saying that loving God means loving one's neighbor, in whose image that person 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 must be to reach out with total abandon and care for others. As the climactic song in *Les Miserables* 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—a marriage of divine proportions. What God has joined together let not man separate.

A story that illustrates this well is Abraham's encounter with the three strangers, in Genesis 18. When Abraham saw these men approaching his tent, he ran to greet them and implored them to come in for food, refreshment and rest. He told Sarah to knead some bread, while he ran to his herd to get the choicest calf and richest milk. Then he served this "thanksgiving meal" to his unknown guests in the beauty and cool of the shade. Here was a husband and wife who loved strangers with their whole heart. Little did they know that their gift was worship of the highest kind, for their guests were deity and angels in disguise. And what rewards they reaped! May your Thanksgiving be so enriched.

This picture says that the essence of spirituality is the complete integration of mind and heart. It is wholehearted love toward God, a love that unifies everything in us. It also identifies fragmentation as the most dangerous enemy to spirituality. I find that the older I get, the less things I want to be involved in, because when I do something I want to do it wholeheartedly. So my motto is, "Do little and do it well." If we can't do something with the whole heart, then it is better not to do it at all.

How will this scribe react to Jesus' answer?

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

And the scribe said to Him, "Right, Teacher, You have truly stated that He is One; and there is no one else besides Him; and to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as himself, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Unlike his colleagues, this man assumes no feigned flattery. He comes with neither craft nor cunning, nothing but pure assent, appreciation and admiration for Jesus. And, going further, with deep insight into the scriptures he adds that these essentials mean much more to the heart of God than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. That is an amazing statement, coming from a Jew who is standing inside the temple precincts just before Passover. This was what David discovered a thousand years earlier (Ps 51:15-17). It was taught over and over again by Israel's sages and prophets.³ This scribe knew deep down that the whole sacrificial sys-

tem was symbolic of deeper realities of the heart, and if those were not understood, rituals meant nothing (Psa 50:7-15). At times, when their full meaning was grasped, rituals were freely forgone (Psa 51:15-17).⁴

Jesus is moved by the scribe's response.

C. Close to the Kingdom (12:34)

And when Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions.

Jesus is impressed that this man is honest, spiritually sensitive, and that he has pure motives. So Jesus responds in kind, with honesty and forthrightness, telling him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." His answer amazes everyone, not only for its positive affirmation but 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" (Jer 32:37-39, NIV; cf. Ezek 11:19).

With the advent of the new covenant the law would be written on human hearts, with the result that man would have an undivided heart. At the same time the sacrificial system would become outdated and redundant (Wright). True faith means not only being spiritually sensitive to the scriptures we study but also sensitive to what God is doing in the present. God is dynamic. He is not static. A Jew with real faith knows that his religion is not merely symbolic, it is also typological. Israel's religion is not only a shadow of heavenly realities, it is also "prophetic," pointing forward to a day when those realities would come to earth; then the shadows would be done away with. 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 (12:35-37)

And Jesus answering began to say, as He taught in the temple, "How is it that the scribes say that the

Christ is the son of David? David himself said in the Holy Spirit, 'The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Until I put your enemies beneath your feet.' David himself calls Him 'Lord'; and so in what sense is He his son?'

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 which 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? As Moule says: "Because, although he is his son by descent and therefore his junior in age, he is also in some mysterious way, superior to David and therefore his senior in rank."

Could it be that David was given a vision of one of his descendents 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 is not a problem to him. Psalm 110 does redefine what sonship means. David goes on to say that this new king will also be "a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." That means the king "will supersede the present high-priestly regime"⁶ (cf. Zech 3:1-4:14). So Jesus has declared that the temple will be destroyed, its sacrifices replaced, and now with this text, 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. It is not enough to know what God requires, you must also see that he has paid all the 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. And once you have a vision of that king in the scriptures your faith moves you to worship. And so we sing with the poet,

Do this and live the law commands
but gives me neither feet nor hands,
a better way does grace doth bring,
it bids me fly and gives me wings.

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

Next, Mark changes the focus from a searching scribe and an exalted son to hypocritical scribes and an extrav-

agant widow.

III. An Extravagant Widow (12:38-44)

A. Devouring Widows (12:38-40)

And the great crowd enjoyed listening to Him. And in His teaching He was saying: "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."

Continuing his teaching in the temple, 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 come, and right there in the temple, Jesus publicly unmask's Israel's scribes for the hypocrites they are. He says they do not serve for love of God or the sheep, but for the honor and prestige religion bestows. They loved to lengthen their prayer shawls (*tallit*) to show how learned they were. 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. (The chief seat in the synagogue "was the bench in front of the ark (containing the scriptures) and facing the people."⁷)

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 own crimes with long public prayers. Jesus says their judgment will be greater (cf. Jas 3:1).

Be careful with the honor you bestow on your leaders. Appreciation is welcomed and needed, but deference is damaging, and financial perks can be very destructive to motives. The purpose of religion is not to bestow perks on it leaders but with what follows now.

B. Worshipping Widows (12:41-44)

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the multitude were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. And calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her pover-

ty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.”

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 the Women.”⁸ As he is sitting there, crowds of people 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. And everyone knew when the rich made their weighty deposits, because the noise would ring out across the entire court.

Into this scene now enters 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 cent apiece.⁹ They barely make a trumpet sound. She had but two coins. She could have kept one, but she threw in both—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 it. To their surprise they learn that she, not the rich, was the greatest contributor to the treasury.

God is moved not by the amount of the gift but the 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 surplus. The poor widow’s gift, although tiny, was symbolic of her complete surrender to God. With those two weightless coins she has cast herself whole 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. Hers was the kind of giving I benefited from years ago in Romania. In a country where food rationing was strict and stringent (five eggs per family, per month), I often found two eggs on my plate at meal-times. This is the kind of love that makes one want to give all! Calvin made the point well: “The poor, who appear not to have the power of doing good, are encouraged by our Lord not to hesitate to express their affections cheerfully out of their slender means; for if they consecrate themselves, their offering, which appears to men to be worthless, will not be less valuable than if they had presented all the treasures of Croesus.”¹⁰

IV. A Scribe, a Son, and a Widow

We can see the stories of these three, the scribe, the son, and the widow, as metaphors for our own journey of faith. With the scribe, we see that the essence of spirituality begins with the “ear” (“Hear O Israel!”).¹¹ We encounter God through hearing of his word. And we see that the driving force of his word is not religious dogma but relationships—loving God and neighbor with the

whole heart. That’s the bottom line. So be a good scribe and ask the right questions.

But even with that clear mandate we are not yet ready to act until we get a vision of the Son. We must first see that everything God requires of us he has already provided in David’s greater Son. That 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. That means we are sons! It is when we hear the Father’s voice crying “son!” into our heart that we are able to worship. A good scribe has become an accepted son.

And finally, the son lives like the widow. Worship leads us to live with outrageous, abandoned love, knowing that the Father is at work in us and through us, making every moment the holy present. So a widow’s holy action, a rare sight in the temple under the old covenant, now becomes commonplace in the community of the new covenant, and this amazing story of a scribe, a son, and a widow becomes a precious cameo of our soul’s journey into faith.

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. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 736-737.

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

4. Though David discovered this truth, it was too radical for his descendants who used the Psalm after the exile to petition God to rebuild their city. They “restored” the sacrifices back into the text (51:18-19).

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 Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge UP, 1959) 384.

8. Cranfield, 386.

9. 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.”

10. Quoted by Cranfield, 387.

11. I am very thankful to Dr. Bruce Waltke for this insight.

©1999 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino