



# Christ Reformed Community Church

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## “The Religion of Taking and Giving” Mark 12:38–44

Mark chapter 12, and this morning we come to verses 38 through 44. The title of the message, “The Religion of Taking and Giving.” Mark chapter 12 beginning in verse 38:

*And in his teaching [Jesus] said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”*

*And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. 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. 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.”*

Thus ends the reading of God’s holy, authoritative, sufficient, and inspired Word. Please be seated and let us ask Him for His help as we look at this text together.

Our Father, we come to that portion in our worship in which we must study Your Word, study ourselves to show ourselves approved as workman who need not to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth. Help us to do that today. Father, we pray that in our hearts would ring true Your Word, not the opinions of man, so Lord, that we wouldn’t seek the praise of man but only the praise of You, our God. We pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.

James 1:27 defines pure religion this way. James says, “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*” In our passage this morning in Mark chapter 12, Jesus moves from attacking the theology of the religious leaders, in particular the scribes, which He did in verses 35 through 37, to attacking their orthopraxy. In other words, He moves from attacking their belief system in verses 35 through 27 to now attack their behavior. What was the application of their false theology? What did it look like in their lives? The common people who were around as Jesus chided the religious leaders, absolutely feared the religious establishment because the religious leaders were men of rank. They were men of notoriety. They were successful men, intelligent men, powerful men, wealthy men, and therefore, very intimidating men. They would have never openly questioned the theology of the scribes or the practice of the scribes. They would have been utterly fearful to do

so, and that is because they were somewhat deceived, but I think that deep down they knew something wasn't quite right with them. I think they inwardly at least applauded Jesus when He cleansed the temple because it was the religious leaders, primarily the Sadducees, who were ripping off all the pilgrims through extortion. I think that inwardly they were impressed with the competent and reasonable answers Jesus gave to all the questions hurled at Him by the religious establishment. In fact, the end of verse 37 says, “[*And*] the great throng heard him gladly.” There was a degree of refreshment when Jesus preached, and even a degree of smiling in their hearts when Jesus chided the hypocritical religious leaders.

You see, the religious leaders' teaching was based in legalism and therefore ,it was taxing on the people while in contrast, Jesus' teaching was based on Scripture and was freeing to their souls. And so, here in this passage as in other places, our Lord exposes the religious leaders, and in exposing the religious leaders, He's really exposing all religious hypocrisy. Their system was a broken system, a broken system that not only influenced those underneath them but actually victimized them through their teaching; one could even say terrorizing the people. The woman in this account that we read was an example of that. She was a victim of a false system of good works as she gave her two mites, the only money that she had. She's a perfect example. The religious leaders' teaching was dead. That's what you need to understand. It was based on dry recitations of oral tradition quoting the rabbis. By contrast, Jesus' teaching was full of life, and it was full of practical instruction regarding true; that is, pure religion on how to love God and how to love neighbor. Jesus has already addressed that, hasn't He, back in verses 30 and 31? “*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 [great commandment] is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*” Jesus therefore defines pure religion as marked by love. Jesus defines pure religion as not just outward but inward. Jesus defines pure religion as being marked by self-denial; that is, giving not taking from others.

But you see, the religious elite taught a system of works-based theology that ironically, they themselves found loopholes in in the Law of God to take what they could and not give back to God. If you remember back in Mark chapter 7, Jesus pointed this out, picking up in verse 6, Jesus said to them, “*Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips,’ that is outwardly, ‘but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’*” That's how they were taxing on the people. They preached and taught their own opinions, which was legalism, and they made the people feel bad underneath them if they didn't follow all their extra religious rules. And Jesus says in verse 8, even more condemning, “*You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men,*” and they were doing that. Remember, they were pronouncing corban on their wealth to avoid helping support their parents in their elderly age. This is just one example, but earlier in Mark, Jesus refers to the religious leaders as the tenants of God's vineyard. They had a responsibility as shepherds to feed the people of God the true Word of God, to help them apply the true Word of God, and that's not what they were doing. They were beating the sheep. They were fleecing the sheep through their bad theology, through their bad orthopraxy, their bad beliefs, their bad behavior. As a matter of fact, Jesus had very strong words to these religious leaders. He spoke about the fact that they just did not bear fruit, and the reason they did not bear fruit, quite frankly, is because they could not bear fruit. Jesus uses a wonderful illustration about a tree and its fruit. He says:

*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus [Jesus says] you will recognize them by their fruits.*

And Jesus has identified them. The religious leaders, illustrated by the cursed and barren fig tree, represent a deceived and fruitless nation from top to bottom, and the religious leaders were the ones responsible for it. Now, Jesus particularly picks upon the Pharisees, and even more particularly than that, the scribes of the Pharisees because—listen folks—they were the most flamboyant of them all and they were the most culpable of them all. They really liked to make a show at their religion, even in the costumes, we could say, that they wore. And what Jesus says about them in this passage was really true not just of the scribes. He just picks them out because they are the most obvious example, but what He says of them is true about all the Pharisees and all the Sadducees and really all of the elders. A much fuller denunciation is given in Matthew 23, the section on the woes against them, but it’s not until Jesus’ trial that He will actually speak to them face-to-face again. In this passage, He speaks about them. Perhaps some of them have hung around, but I doubt it. They have left because they have been embarrassed, and so, in verses 38 through 44, Jesus really applies now to the throng who has heard Him gladly the great commandments that He gave in verses 30 and 31, to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love one’s neighbor as himself. What does that mean practically? And here is how Jesus does it. He contrasts religious hypocrisy with true spiritual devotion, and He does so by using the example of money, an idol not merely of the religious leaders but of all men in every culture.

He shows how money corrupts. It corrupts true believers in their devotion to God, whether poor or rich. He shows how money talks. How we view it, spend it, use it says what we think about it and what we think about God. And yet at the same time and more deeply, here’s the deeper point; He reminds us that money does not buy one’s way into the kingdom. Whether you are rich and give large sums or if you are poor and give all you have, you can’t buy your way into the kingdom. In fact, only the poverty—here’s the irony—only the poverty of Christ will get us into the kingdom. This is precisely what Paul’s words were in 2 Corinthians 8:9: *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”*

Furthermore, in this passage, Jesus reminds us that true devotion to God is determined not solely by optics or exteriors, but by God who reads the interior, God who reads the heart. It’s the principle of 1 Samuel 16:7: *“For the LORD sees not as man sees, man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”* So, this is a very practical portion of Scripture, and what Jesus does in these verses, verses 38 through 44 is He reveals lessons centered around a contrast between religious hypocrisy on the one hand and true spiritual devotion on the other. And He does it by offering two examples: one about taking and the other about giving. Notice with me, first of all, the example of taking, and we see this in verses 38 through 40. Jesus denounces religious hypocrisy by pointing to several of its features that don’t impress Him, but first notice in verse 38 that it says, *“And in his teaching [Jesus] said”* these things. This shows us that this is connected with the preceding verses. The scribe earlier who had asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest in

order to see if he was going to get into the kingdom, the one to whom Jesus said, “*You are not far from the kingdom.*,” that is connected, therefore, with what is being said here. I think Jesus is playing off of the conversations that He’s had with all of these committees from the religious authorities, and in particular, this scribe, a well-meaning scribe but one who was far from the kingdom. Now Jesus is going to talk about his kind, and so Jesus says there in verse 38: “*Beware of the scribes.*” I mean, this serves as our Lord’s leading statement. How’s that for a first statement of a sermon? “*Beware of the scribes.*” To borrow Old Testament language, the shepherds of Israel, the religious elite were fleecing the sheep. And so, Jesus points out the scribes because they were the primary experts in the law. But He’s telling the people to be on guard against any religious leader or really against any religious hypocrite who’s marked by the characteristics that the scribes are marked by. That statement, “*Beware of the scribes,*” would have shocked the original hearers, not only because some of the scribes might still be mingling around but also because the Mishna, which later wrote down oral tradition said this, and I quote: “It is more culpable to transgress the words of the scribes than those of the Law of God.” I mean, by Jesus pointing the scribes out and saying beware of them, He’s really picking a fight.

And so, what are the characteristics of religious hypocrites that don’t impress God? That’s what Jesus is denouncing here. This doesn’t just apply to religious leaders. This certainly doesn’t just apply to the religious leaders of the Jews. It applies to all self-proclaimed religious people who are hypocrites, and we know that they are hypocrites by what they pursue, what their motives are, and Jesus points out three characteristics of them. They are takers not givers, first of all, because they are marked and they desire a spectacular reputation. That’s what they’re after. Notice verse 38: “*Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces.*” That phrase, “*who like to*” is from *thelō*. It means “to relish or take delight in.” In other words, first of all, they prided themselves and they relished the opportunity to walk around in long robes. This would have been in contrast to the colorful robes that most Jews wore. Verse 38 says they “*walk around in long robes.*” It’s likely these were white robes, and the word *robes* or *long robes* is *stolais* in the Greek. It was an expensive outer garment that reached down to the ground with tassels on the end of it. Now, Numbers chapter 15 actually prescribes that all Jews wear these, so it wasn’t sinful to wear them. In fact, Jesus wore a garment, an outer garment with tassels on it. In Mark 6:56, a summary verse: “*And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.*”

So, Jesus had tassels on His garment. Scripture doesn’t condemn wearing expensive or fine clothing or outer garments, in this case, with tassels. It actually condones it. But here’s the issue; the scribes were motivated by flamboyance, drawing attention to themselves, and so I think this wasn’t the normal longer robe with tassels that Jesus wore and probably the other disciples and other Jewish men. This would have been what was called the *tallith*. This would have been a long blanket. It was really like a prayer shawl that one wore around their shoulders as big as a blanket, and it reached all the way to the ground. It drew attention to oneself with its long tassels. It showcased the credentials of the scribes as expert lawyers. It was their badge of pride, distinguishing them as the scholars, distinguishing them from the other common people. And they even wore them, I think verse 38 is telling us, not merely in the synagogue when they prayed and taught but also outside of the synagogue because verse 38 says they also relished—notice it—“*greetings in the marketplaces.*” They liked to walk around in long robes, and they liked greetings

in the marketplaces; that is, in public. Not talking about courteous hellos. These were respectful greetings of deferment to their authority and to their reputation. I mentioned earlier Matthew chapter 23 where Jesus goes into greater detail on this. Jesus says they like *“greetings in the marketplaces and,”* they like *“being called rabbis by others.”* They like titles. That’s what they wanted, to draw attention to themselves. They relished and demanded respect and public recognition for their prominence and their religious reputation. In fact, people often rose to their feet in the presence of a scribe.

Now, what do we learn from this pursuit of a spectacular reputation? Well, we learn first of all this doesn’t impress God. This doesn’t impress God. Religious hypocrites care more about what man thinks than they do what God thinks, a desire to honor man rather than desiring to honor God. And let me just say this morning, it matters not who you please if you displease God, and it matters not who you displease if God is pleased. We aren’t to be religiously pompous twits, walking around pretentious, as if we are better than everybody, and if we do, then we’re just like the religious leaders in Jesus’ day. It’s like the arrogant man that Woodrow Wilson described as being so arrogant that he could strut while sitting down. That was the religious leaders, the scribes. And I think this has particular application not just to every Christian who might be sucked into legalism or pride, but I think it applies specifically to teachers and leaders in the church, and teachers and leaders that care more about their religious reputation than inward devotion to God or outward service to others. Paul would give instructions, for example, to young Timothy. He said, *“Keep a close watch on yourself,”* 1 Timothy 4:16: *“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”*

You see, Israel was largely unsaved during Jesus’ day because the religious leaders, the teachers didn’t keep a close watch on themselves and their teaching. They didn’t guard their hearts. They cared more for their religious reputation than the souls under their care, and I’ll remind you that even teachers today in the church that have this sort of attitude really need to watch out. Jesus has strong words. Jesus said in Matthew 23, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte.”* “And you talk about all the converts that you have and all the work you do, and Jesus says, *“And when he becomes a proselyte [of you],”* guess what happens? *“You make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”* You’re not saving anybody. You’re sending people to hell because you’re motivated by a spectacular reputation, and Jesus is denouncing that on the part of the scribes. They’re constantly wanting to take from others respect and attention. But flowing from this desire for a spectacular reputation, came also a desire for a superior position. Notice verse 39. Jesus goes on to say, *“And [they] have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts.”* In other words, they’re not satisfied with people viewing them as super spiritual. Religious hypocrites have to throw their weight around, always trying to get their way, being the top dog, constantly being noticed by others and being served. As Jesus says here, the scribes insisted that they have the best seats in the synagogues. They were able to strut even while sitting down, and they cared where they sat down. The best seats in the synagogues would have include not just the ones in the front of the synagogue that the scribes would sit in as they faced the congregation, but this would have included the seats along the walls which were really just benches. There were benches along the walls for the scribes and important people to sit upon to elevate themselves over everybody else who sat on the floor, the common person because most people sat on the floor in the synagogue.

You see, these religious leaders craved a superior position. They didn't just want it inside of the synagogue but also outside of it, just as they wore their expensive garments in the synagogue and outside in the marketplace. They didn't just want their seats in the synagogue; they wanted positions of power outside of it. The end of verse 39 says and they also want *“the places of honor at feasts.”* So, it didn't matter whether they were conducting ministry or not, they wanted a superior position, *“places of honor at feasts.”* This probably refers to the right or left side of the host of a meal or the host of a party, or maybe just the seats at the host's table. And what do we learn from this desire to pursue a position? Well, we learn from this, that religious hypocrites are always jockeying for position. They're always fighting to be the top dog, the big dog, the alpha male, if you will, and their motivation for status and position is always out of whack. Go back to chapter 10 of Mark and verse 35. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, what do they do? *“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask,”* and, of course, you know the story. They want to sit one on the right and one on the left. They want the best seats. They want a position. And Jesus calls the disciples to Him. Verse 42, He says, *“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.”* Don't you realize that the gentiles; that is, unbelievers want positions of authority so they can dominate others? *“But,”* verse 43, *“it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”* And if you have a problem with that, just consider verse 45: *“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* Religious hypocrites are marked by putting love of self over love for others, and in James 1:27, James speaks about pure and undefiled religion, but after speaking about that, he gives an example in James chapter 2 of partiality. He says:

*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place.” That is on one of the benches, “While you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” Sit down at the floor. Get out of my way or sit down beneath me. James says:*

*Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him.*

It matters not if another Christian is poor or rich or what their position is or how important they are. James' point is we are to serve them. And then after that, James goes on to give even more practical instruction in chapter 3: *“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”* He's addressing this issue of positional authority. Be careful not desire a position of authority, specifically that of a teacher because you're speaking with the authority of God; and if you get it wrong, you'll be held accountable by God with stricter judgment. There's not a week in my life that goes by without feeling the weight of James 3:1 because all shepherds, all elders both in life and lip are not to take their positions lightly. It's a privilege, not a prerogative. But you see, the religious leaders and especially the scribes, they just liked the position. They just liked the reputation, and they were hypocrites and Jesus exposes them, and yet there's a third characteristic of religious hypocrites.

This isn't just teachers or leaders among the Jews or in the church, but these are characteristics that mark all religious hypocrites.

They can't impress God, first of all, because they pursue spectacular reputation; secondly, superior position; but third, verse 40, sinister manipulation marks them. The example of religious hypocrisy in Jesus' day is stunning. Notice He says about the scribes in verse 40: *“Who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers.”* What is this about? Well, this is the exploitation of widows. It actually resulted from an unbiblical notion rooted in the oral tradition that said scribes shouldn't take money for their work. Rabbis shouldn't take a paycheck for their work. They should have another job. But this was the creation of the office of scribes, something that God didn't endorse. If you remember, originally in Deuteronomy, it was the priests who were the teachers of the Law. Well, the scribes were created, which created a problem, and the problem was that the people said because it was an invention of man, and anybody could make the rules, if you're a scribe, you can't be paid a salary. And so, scribes were dependent on subsidies apart from a stated salary. They could only accept donations, but you see, because man invented the scribal tradition, the scribes would make their own rules as well, and they did. They created scenarios where they said that donating to a scribe was considered a good work, not entirely dissimilar to what happened in the Reformation with Johann Tetzel—I guess before the Reformation—where they were saying you could buy your relatives out of purgatory by paying a fee to the church. It was a good work. Well, you know what this resulted in? It resulted in what is described in verse 40, devouring widows' houses. This is religious trafficking. This is a prostitution of the Word of God. That's what Jesus is pointing out.

Now, I need to hasten to say that in some cases, Paul didn't allow certain churches to support him financially. This was by no means the majority. In fact, it was the minority, and there was always a reason for it. In fact, turn with me to 2 Thessalonians chapter 3. We've been looking at this, but Paul says in verse 7: *“For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.”* But notice what he says, “Yeah, I made tents on the side not to be a burden to you,” but here's why. *“It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.”* There was a specific issue going on in the Thessalonian congregation where people had quit their jobs because they believed in the imminent return of the Lord, and they thought they didn't need to work. And so, Paul in that case, while still receiving support from other churches, refused to accept support from this church in order to set an example. He was faithful in practicing what he preached. But according to the New Testament and the Old Testament, payment to ministers was acceptable. First Timothy 5:18: *“For the Scripture says,”* Paul quotes the Old Testament, *“‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”*

In other words, this is someone you are paying. You should expect that he's a man of God, that he has a reputation that is godly. He's laboring in the Word of God. And verse 17 even says you are to treat elders with double honor, especially those who labor hard at preaching and teaching. So, the Old Testament by principle, supported the notion of paying ministers, so not paying the scribes in the Old Testament was a sin in and of itself, but let's be fair here, they created their own office. It was the priests who were supposed to teach the Law. God is always against exploiting others for

selfish gain. In other words, most of the time a minister will be paid, but all of the time, God is against exploiting others in the name of ministry. The Judaizers later did this. In Titus 1, they acquired filthy lucre or shameful gain. Well, that’s exactly what’s happening here in Jesus’ day. Jesus is describing the scribal practice of ministry manipulation and it’s picturesque language. Notice it again, they “*devour widows’ houses.*” Literally in the Greek, “they eat up.” They ate up the resources of those who had the least resources, fattening their bank accounts by gorging themselves on donations of the widows. And the mention of widows’ houses indicates one or more of the following types of manipulation. Number one, it could have been that there was an actual widow fund under the control of the scribes, of course, from which they could draw freely for selfish gain. And then they would go out and sell subscriptions basically, pressuring widows because they could pressure them with no man in the home, to donate their money to the point that they lost their houses, and the scribes weren’t there to help them once that happened.

Another thing that could have been occurring is that since these scribes were educated and highly trustworthy, as representatives of God, they used that to open up side businesses or franchises, if you like, specializing in helping widows settle the estates of their recently dead husbands so that in that sort of emotional state, they could take advantage of them, and then they would just charge unreasonable rates for their services. We don’t know exactly what Jesus has in mind. It could have just been in general, they took advantage of unsuspecting desperate widows by reminding them, “If you donate to the synagogue, if you donate to us, it’s a good work and you get merit with God.” We don’t know exactly. Here’s the point, in some cases the widows actually lost their houses, but in all cases, they lost needed money from their bank accounts that the scribes ate up, they just devoured. Now, this is the opposite of a truly-called minister of God, especially an elder in the church or a pastor of a church. Paul would speak about this in very clear terms in his first letter to the Thessalonians. He says to them, “*For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed.*” In other words, Paul says, “I’m not in it for money. That’s not why I’m doing this. *God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you.*” In other words, Paul says, “I could have taken advantage of you because I speak in the name of God as an apostle, but I never even thought about going there. I didn’t say what you wanted to hear so that I got your money.” That’s what Paul is saying, but, you see, that’s exactly what the scribes did. They devoured widows’ houses, and they didn’t do it by mere pressure. They did it “*with a pretext for greed,*” to borrow Paul’s words from 1 Thessalonians. They were the most vulnerable, so they were the most easy to exploit, these widows, and they were suckered.

They not only used their positions as scribes, but listen to this, they used their prayers as scribes. Notice verse 40: They “*devour widows’ houses,*” and listen to this, “*and for a pretense make long prayers.*” For a pretense, they had a pretense for greed. They had a cover for their sinister manipulation. What was the cover? Long prayers. Long prayers. Isn’t that amazing? Apparently, they prayed long prayers for widows in exchange for their promised donations. I mean, I imagine them praying in the synagogue and peeking while they’re praying publicly to see if the widows were listening to their prayers. Maybe prayers for them to butter them up. Maybe praying in a way that that would pressure them to give. Maybe praying in a way to impress them so that people would buy into their sincerity. Maybe preying on these widows to say that God provides our needs if we just give to Him. I don’t exactly what it was, but this was sinister manipulation. This was praying, P-R-A-Y-I-N-G- for the widows to get leverage to prey, P-R-E-Y upon them. They were



praying over them so that they could about the task of preying upon them, taking advantage of them. And it’s really interesting if you read Jewish history, Josephus, for example, tells the story of a Jewish religious charlatan who was such a scoundrel that he was exiled to Rome. He was kicked out of Israel, and he pretended to be a scribe in this foreign land, persuading Jews of the dispersion to give large donations of money, and one woman in particular of high standing named Fulvia—we actually know her name—she made a substantial donation to the temple in Jerusalem, but instead of taking the money to Jerusalem, this scoundrel embezzled the money. And so, Jesus is speaking to people in this day who know this is happening. They just don’t talk about it. Jesus is willing to talk about it. He says these are religious charlatans, these scribes. They’re not just neglecting widows; they’re taking full advantage of them.

And this morning, I don’t want to get into some sort of study about widows because that’s really not the point of the passage, and I want to stay on task, but do you realize how much the Old Testament speaks about caring for widows? It is absolutely staggering, and in fact, Isaiah chapter 10, the prophet speaks about you, “*Woe to you,*” he says. That sounds like Jesus, doesn’t it? You “*turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!*” Wow, this was going on for generations, wasn’t it? Amos speaks about it in Amos 2. Micah speaks about it in Micah 3. But folks, I want you to understand this sort of ministerial manipulation is not confined to the Jews. This is prevalent in modern-day ministry. I don’t know if Corie and Geoff and Carrie will remember this, but maybe a year after we planted the church, we were meeting in the school, and we all received, or at least we received a flashy, shiny brochure in the mail that said, “Attention! A new church plant is coming to the community, and you can become an elder in this church, depending upon how much money you donate.” I kid you not. Do you remember that? It’s just staggering, totally out there, a flashy brochure to buy one’s position.

You see, all religious hypocrites are marked by outward sham, but really inward shame as well. The people may not have talked about this, but Jesus did. It was sort of hush-hush, but people knew what was going on. Matthew 23:27, “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.*” I mean, it’s not just outward sham; it’s inward shame. This is deplorable. But notice Jesus concludes verse 40 by showing that God is not only not impressed, but He roundly condemns. He’s actually angered at such ministry manipulation. He says at the end of verse 40, “*They will receive the greater condemnation.*” Why such judgment? Why such greater judgment? Well, the answer is because of their influence of so many people, as I believe, like this poor widow who gave all she had, as we’re going to see, because she was a victim. She was deceived. In Matthew chapter 23, Jesus says:

*“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.*”

*Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’*

*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides.”*

You see, Jesus still condemns those who take from others. How do you take from others? Well, you do it by practicing self-advancement for an outer facade of a spectacular reputation or superior position, and you do it by sinister manipulation in the name of religion. This will not only not receive the applause of God. It may receive the applause of man, but it’s a thumbs down by God. You remember what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount. He was so clear:

*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Jesus says, “I say to you, those who do it for the outer show will receive their reward,” and what is that? The outward applause of man, but two thumbs down from God, as Jesus said, “*For they love the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.*” Religious hypocrisy is not true devotion, no matter how flashy and shiny it may be. It neither loves God nor loves neighbor. In fact, it walks on neighbor. Instead of helping others, it harms others. Instead of giving to others, it takes from others. Instead of loving others, it loves self. That is the heart of a religious hypocrite, and the only thing that can save a religious hypocrite is the same thing that can save non-religious rebellious people. It’s the gospel. It’s the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But in the lesson on true spiritual devotion that Jesus is giving, contrasted with religious hypocrisy, Jesus moves from an example about taking, number two, to the example of giving. He moves from the example of taking, the scribes, now to the example of giving with this poor widow, but notice there are also rich people involved, and also what He says here applies about the scribes, and I’ll show you what I mean. First of all, both the timing and the topic revealed in verses 38 through 40, and verses 41 and 44 clearly are connected. Jesus is still addressing the topic of religious hypocrisy. Remember, He’s in the temple and He’s teaching, right? So, what do we read in verse 41? It says, “*He sat down opposite the treasury.*” Well, where was the treasury? The treasury was in the temple. Apparently, Jesus is done teaching, so He goes and He sits down across from the treasury. Now, in Jesus’ day—you need to understand this—the temple had a treasury of vaults that contained all sorts of treasures and wealth. In front of these vaults or somewhere within the vicinity of these vaults were large receptacles to donate money, and this treasury was found in the court of women. That would have been the first interior court. It was called the court of woman not because men weren’t allowed in there, but because woman weren’t allowed any further than that. The larger court of gentiles was uncovered, and anyone was allowed in there, even gentiles, but in the temple treasury located in the court of women was the storing of massive amounts of wealth, so that the temple was not just a house of worship, but it was something like the central bank of the nation. You remember, since the Levites were not given an allotment of land in the Old Testament, they were given the temple grounds to steward and to partially live off of. It included stewarding and even collecting this money, but they had to steward these donations, these treasures of wealth that

would come in various forms. Remember the exchange of money in the temple to buy the sacrifices. They exchanged various forms of currency. They deposited the money in the receptacles for people. You could walk up and deposit your own money. They needed this money for vessels, vessels used for worship because the Bible required they be made of gold and silver. They needed this money for what the Bible required initially in the tabernacle, that portable temple in the wilderness, costly curtains, costly priestly garments. I mean, big storerooms filled with all that was needed for the sacrifices. You had big rooms full of flour, grain, oil, wine, incense. In fact, Josephus said this was such an operation that the chief priest was the most important person in the temple. You know who was second? The administrator of the treasury.

Jesus sits, verse 41 says, *“opposite the treasury”* where He could see, looking in the court of women, thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles made of brass. Now, remember Passover is near. There’re some 250,000 pilgrims walking in and out of the temple doing activity, buying sacrifices, and depositing their annual offerings in light of the Passover. In fact, the Mishna tells us that each one of these trumpet-shaped receptacles, there were thirteen of them, were designated as to what sort of donation you were making, whether it was the new shekel dues or bird offerings or money for wood, money to buy frankincense, money to buy gold for the mercy seat, or maybe you just put gold coins in for the mercy seat. Six of these receptacles were marked *“free will offerings,”* where just out of the goodness of your heart you could give whatever you wanted to. You also need to remember there were no credit cards back then. I know that seems obvious. There were no large paper bills. There was no direct deposit, so all the money that entered the receptacles could be heard. The clanging of the coins could be heard as they went down the inverted horn, the trumpet, all that money clanging on the brass.

With this background in mind, we see Jesus making, first of all, a sovereign observation. Notice verse 41: *“And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people.”* He *“watched the people putting money into the offering box.”* Now, the word *watched* is *theōreō*. It is the idea of *“carefully observing.”* So you know exactly what Jesus is doing here. He’s doing something that you all do—and don’t say you don’t do it. You’re all guilty of people watching when you’re in public because people are curious people; what they wear, how they walk, their mannerisms. So, Jesus is people watching, and no doubt there are others around Him doing the same thing, hundreds, thousands of pilgrims. Now, in lieu of the first sanctuary to be constructed, the tabernacle, Exodus 25 commands that God’s people give to that. People also gave at the construction of the new temple, but even before that the principle of tithing in and of itself reached all the way back to father Abraham, and so in Israel’s culture, here’s the way that it worked. It was an agrarian or farming culture. The Bible prescribed the tithing of grain, new wine, oil, the firstborn of one’s flocks and herds, Deuteronomy 14. It also said that you were to give gifts supporting priests and Levites, gifts that would support foreigners, gifts that would relieve the needy like orphans and widows, Deuteronomy 26, and Israel was expected to do that. Now, given what Jesus has just taught in verses 38 through 40, it’s safe to assume that Jesus is reading the hearts of these religious people. In other words, Jesus is not merely people watching; He’s soul searching. This sovereign observation is going right into the hearts of all those people bringing their offerings, not just the poor widow but also the rich people.

So, we move from the sovereign observation, number two, to the serious examination. Verse 41, the end of it, *“Many rich people put in large sums.”* That was the first sort of people that came,

but then verse 42 says, *“And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny.”* Now, just imagine for a moment the loud clanging of coins from the large and rich donors versus the sound of the tinkling of the two small copper coins from the poor widow. Lots has been written about this. Lots has been written about how much she gave, how you put that in modern-day currency, but here’s the main point; she gave not as much as the rich people in terms of actual volume of money. That is clear. Verse 41 says *“Many rich people put in large sums.”* She didn’t. Verse 42, she *“put in two small copper coins.”* One copper coin, one lepta in the Greek, was the smallest coin in circulation in Palestine. To give you an idea, it was 1/64<sup>th</sup> of one denarius, a denarius being the one day’s pay of a common laborer. Mark writes to gentiles in Rome, remember? So, he has to convert the currency. He says that she gave two lepta, two small copper coins, which is the equivalent, he says verse 42, to a penny. He says at the end of verse 42, *“which make a penny.”* So, for our sake, essentially this is two American pennies. She gave all she had, but all she had was only two cents, not a lot.

One lepta was less than a centimeter in diameter. I mean, you could probably even hear it clanging in the inverted horn of those trumpet-shaped receptacles, and could you imagine the response from the other people-watchers? I can imagine it. Oohing and aahing over the loud clanging from the large donations, and perhaps gasps and maybe even laughter when the poor widow’s goes in, but Jesus wasn’t merely looking at the exterior. He was not just a people-watcher. He was a soul-searcher, and He was observing not just the heart of this poor widow but also that of the rich people. Now, here’s a question: Was Jesus commending this woman for giving all that she had? There are many people that could use this verse and teach a distorted and perverted theology. It’s called the health-wealth prosperity gospel, and they do use this passage to say that. At this point, Mark is just giving us Jesus’ observation. He’s made a sovereign observation, and He’s making a serious examination, but there’s no conclusion. At this point, we’re left guessing whether He commends her and whether, quite frankly, He commends any of the people that gave money because the focus here is the religiosity of the people for showmanship. That’s the issue. What we do know is this; God not only read the poor widow’s heart and all the rich people’s hearts, but He reads your heart as well. He reads my heart as well. Hebrews 4:13: *“And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”* God looks for cheerful devotion, not simply resentful duty. He also looks for and condemns any sort of religious showmanship. And if you wonder about that, just read Acts 5:1–11 this Sabbath evening about Ananias and Sapphira.

But continuing in the vein of religious hypocrisy, we see not only our Lord’s sovereign observation, His serious examination, but finally verses 43 and 44, His solemn conclusion. So, what does all this mean? Notice your Bibles. *“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. 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.’”* What does Jesus do here? Well, Jesus offers His “two cents” if you will, on what He has observed and examined because He can read hearts. And His two cents amounts to more than the weight of anyone else’s opinion. What anyone else may think, Jesus’ two cents weighs more. This is serious stuff. It’s solemn. First of all, verse 43 says, *“And he called his disciples to him.”* That’s something He did when He wanted to teach something very important to the disciples. We saw it in chapter 3, chapter 6, chapter 8, chapter 10, calling the disciples to Him. He also prefaces the lesson He gives, this solemn conclusion, if you will, on the

matter of religious hypocrisy by this phrase, *“Truly, I say to you,” Amēn*, that’s used when what He says is of weighty significance. Everything Jesus said was of weighty significance, but some things were more weighty than other things. “I solemnly declare,” some translations say. This is a solemn conclusion, I think, on the whole matter of religious hypocrisy because these verses about the poor widow are connected with His chiding of the religious leaders, the scribes, who devoured widows like this.

Now, admittedly, in these verses Jesus does not explicitly commend this woman, but He does make a contrast. Notice, verse 43: *“Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box.”* So, He is making some example of her. She put in more than all those who contributed; that is, back in verse 41, *“[the] rich people put in large sums.”* Verse 44 explains: *“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.”* You see, Jesus knew her heart, He knew the hearts of the rich, He knows your heart. She was a victim of ministerial manipulation, exploitation. What exactly is Jesus looking for? Well, He sort of tells us. In short, He wants spiritual devotion, not religious hypocrisy. No matter who you are, no matter how much money you bring, no matter what your position is, He cares about your heart. Do you love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself, money or no money? But I do think there are five basic principles we glean from this solemn conclusion in verses 43 and 44. The first one is this: God does not merely judge by watching outer actions but by examining inner motives. I think it’s clear that’s one of the points here. Someone once said that character is what we are in the dark. What does 1 Corinthians chapter 13 speak about? Well, it speaks about love, and it speaks about love to a congregation of people who were about showmanship, right? They were about their spiritual gifts, and they weren’t loving others, and Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 13: *“If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”*

In another place, Paul says it’s like a noisy cymbal. It’s like loud instruments, whatever it is that you do, however you serve. We can say in this case, it’s like clanging money on the offering plate, if your motive is to prove to others how spiritual you are by how much you give. You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving, and the point here is that our stewardship, whether in giving money to the Lord’s work or service rendered to Him, is measured by proportion, not addition because Jesus says here this woman by proportion gave more, right? She gave more than those who gave large sums. Two cents out of two cents is more money than one thousand cents out of ten thousand. Now, the latter is actually a tithe, but the former is a bigger contribution. Even though it’s less money, it’s more in proportion. Second Corinthians 8:3 says that the Macedonians, as poor as they were, *“gave according to their means.”* They gave according to what they had. This is what this widow does. She goes beyond that, and so did the Macedonians. But 2 Corinthians 9:7 also says, lest we believe in some sort of health-wealth prosperity or spirituality by giving a lot of money, 2 Corinthians 9:7 says we aren’t to give *“reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”* Adrian Rogers used to say, “Don’t give until it hurts. Give until it feels good.” The issue is not the percentage or the amount; the issue is do you give at all? And there’s a second basic principle: God doesn’t need your spiritual gifts or your money. He didn’t need to solicit donors to build His kingdom. He doesn’t need our gifts. He builds His church with His own resources. It all belongs to Him anyway. He has infinite resources. He owns *“the cattle on a thousand hills”* and the cattle on a thousand and one hills. But the Bible does say,

*“Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.”*

So when it comes to giving, you give back really that which you’ve already received from Him. God doesn’t want your money. He doesn’t need your money. He wants you. He wants all of you. He wants you to love Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. It’s like the father giving spare change from his pocket to his son so his son can buy the father a birthday present. That’s what God does with us. Our money is not ours. Our spiritual gifts aren’t ours. I don’t even think money is the primary point of this passage. I think stewardship is. I think religious hypocrisy contrasted with true spiritual devotion is the issue. There’s a third principle. Giving to the Lord’s work is often a move of religious hypocrites to show how important they really are. And see, I think that’s what’s happening here. I think that these wealthy people pranced forward. Verse 41: *“Many rich people put in large sums.”* They probably threw it in so it banged louder against the trumpet-shaped receptacles. You see, some people give with false humility. It’s like the man who stood up in public. It was a church meeting, and he said, “Jesus said we aren’t to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. So because of that, I would like to humbly donate five thousand dollars to the need of our church, but of course I want this donation to be anonymous.” *[Laughter]* You can give a lot and really be giving less, and you can give a little and really be giving more. That’s the point. And I should say this, I’m sure the wealthy pranced to the donation boxes in the temple, but Jesus is at the same time not saying those who give a lot always are trying to make a show of it. I know many wealthy people that don’t you to even know they’re wealthy, that are strong Christians. Nor on the other hand is He saying that only if you give a little that makes you more spiritual because He stops short of commending this woman. He stops short, and in fact in Mark 14, He commends a woman in Bethany.

Jesus is reclining at a table. *“A woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.”* Now, that could be viewed as pompous, right? Well, Jesus actually does commend her. She gave a lot, and Jesus commends her. Fourth, here’s another principle: ministry exploitation for money to line one’s own pockets—this goes without saying—or to make others feel less spiritual because they don’t give as much as you give is roundly condemned in Scripture. You see, this woman was a victim of the works-based religious system. Maybe she was giving out the goodness of her heart, but to give all she had? Is that really what God wanted her to do? She was led to believe that’s what God wanted her to do because of the scribes who were devouring houses like hers, eating up the money. Exploitation for money is one of the most severest sins of the modern-day church. We need to be on guard against it. Clearly, Jesus condemns that by principle in this passage.

So, there are many principles. First, that God does not merely judge by watching outer actions but by examining inner motives; secondly, that God doesn’t need our spiritual gifts or our money; third, that giving to the Lord’s work is often a move of a religious hypocrite to show how important they are; fourth, ministry exploitation for money to line one’s pockets is sin; and a fifth one, and here’s where I think all of this is leading, I really do. Regardless of this woman’s motives, only Jesus knows, just like He only knows your motives and He only knew the motives of the rich people. Jesus uses this woman, I think, as an example. Notice the language again. He says, verse 44: *“All [those rich people] contributed out of their abundance, but she,”* contributed, what does it say? Out of her what? *“Poverty.”* *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though*

*he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”* Jesus gave all that He had. This woman is an example, more than anything, of Christ. She’s an example of Christ, regardless of her motives. On the exterior, giving all she had was an example of Christ. She gave out of her poverty. Jesus gave to the point of poverty. The point of this is not to focus on the woman and on her giving and on her service. That’s not the point because if that’s the emphasis, then it’s emphasizing how one can buy their way into the kingdom, and Jesus is clear here that’s what the scribes were trying to do by their hypocrisy, by their obedience was to buy their way into the kingdom, and here’s how they did it. The devoured widows’ houses to get money to look religious to try to impress God. Didn’t work.

Christ was rich, became poor so that we through His poverty might become rich with salvation. That’s how this woman is an example, so that true devotion to God does not take from others, but it receives from Jesus His salvation and gives to others and demonstrates to others what we have received by grace alone through faith alone. We have received inwardly the love of God shed abroad in our hearts. We are to outwardly love others. We’re to outwardly give them the gospel. We are not to take from them. We are to give to them. We are to take from God what He has promised through Christ and receive the riches of His grace, and then exhaust ourselves in serving Him as good stewards like the parable of the talents, in our giving, in our serving, in our living. To sum it up, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. May God give us the grace to do just that.

Father, we thank You for Your Word. Your Word is truth and Your Word convicts and reproves. Your Word gives us insight into the life of our Lord, which gives us insight into the heart of our Lord. We see Him in this passage, the one who has X-ray vision, seeing right through religious sham, religious hypocrisy. Lord, it is all of our tendencies in some form or fashion to have elements of hypocrisy, and we must repent of those. We must point the finger at ourselves before we point it at others, and yet at the same time, we must be on the alert. We must be discerning regarding religious charlatans, whether teachers or leaders in the church, other religious hypocrites that may influence us by their waywardness. Lord, help us to love You with all our heart. Help us to love others. Help us to be true inwardly obedient Christians, not just outwardly obedient Christians. We know that You’ll, by the power of Your Spirit indwelling us, help us to do that. We thank You for it ahead of time. We pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.