



Speaker:
Paul Forrest

True Religion

Series: The Gospel of Mark · 45 of 45

4/25/2021 (SUN) | Bible: **Mark 12:35-44**

And Jesus answered and said, while he taught in the temple, “How say the scribes that Christ is the Son of David? For David himself said by the Holy Ghost, The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool.’ David therefore himself calleth him Lord; and whence is he then his son?” And the common people heard him gladly.

And he said unto them in his doctrine, “Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts; which devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayers. These shall receive greater damnation.”

And Jesus sat over against the treasury and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury. And many that were rich cast in much.

And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing.

And he called unto him his disciples and saith unto them, “Verily I say unto you that this poor widow hath cast more in than all they which have cast into the treasury; for all they did cast in of their abundance. but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.”

Last week, we witnessed the last of three approaches to Jesus made by the religious leaders. Each one had the intention of catching Jesus out in some way. Last time, it was the turn of a scribe. But this ended on a hopeful note, with Jesus informing the man he was at the very door of the kingdom of God.

Today, Jesus turns his attention away from the religious leaders. And in Mark’s gospel, this is a critical point in the saviour’s Jerusalem story. Jesus has now finished his interactions with these groups. He continues to teach the people and his disciples, but he knows in a few days he’ll be dead.

You’ll probably have spotted three distinct parts to our reading today. There’s enough of interest in each part to put together several sermons. Now I know some preachers think they do a Bible book more justice the longer they spend on it. You *can* go into that much detail, but there’s very little momentum.

I thought we’d treat these three sections in one sitting because they’re connected. Now I know we have Jesus starting with theological matter, continuing into a criticism of these religious leaders, and ending with a lesson about giving. They might seem to be unrelated;

but there is a thread of teaching running through all three, and this is what I hope to bring out today.

To outline where I'm going with this, think of what Jesus said like this. He begins with a doctrinal matter he knows the teachers didn't grasp, exposes their sinful behaviour, and finishes with a positive example of sacrificial commitment to God. All this provides us with contrasts between the false religion these teachers were part of and the true religion of the one who has the Spirit.

Discernment versus darkness

The Bible is central to the Christian faith. It's an extension of the Hebrew Scriptures, of course. And we believe it's the word of God which is the means God uses when saving someone.

Last week, we spoke about how the Christian is saved through the word of God and afterwards lives *by* the word of God. We are more or less helped by the Holy Spirit to guide us into more understanding. He does what Jesus did with his disciples:

Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures

Luke 24:45

And this role of the Holy Spirit in our lives is not some new phenomenon, introduced in the gospel age. You can see in verse 36 Jesus telling us King David possessed the Holy Spirit. So although every living creature is alive because of the power of the Holy Spirit, the believer is said to have the Spirit in a unique way. Listen to what the apostle Paul says:

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him. Neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:12–16

Now although the Scriptures contain a lot of stuff, without doubt the most important knowledge to get from the Bible is that which concerns the person and work of Jesus Christ. And this this is exactly what Jesus is encouraging these teachers to think about.

The point Jesus is making in verses 35 to 37 is maybe not clear at first. He presents to them a conundrum. If you look in verse 36, particularly the quotation from David, you'll see the word "Lord" used twice. Now most of you will know that when you see the word spelled in all capital letters, it refers to God. When the translators of our old English version came across the name of God, *Jehovah* or *Yahweh*, they sometimes translated it "as is" and sometimes using this word "LORD".

The second “Lord” refers to the Messiah. What David’s saying is, *God in heaven said to his Christ, “Sit alongside me and rule with me while I subdue your enemies”*.

The Messiah David spoke of was to be one of his descendants. And sure enough Jesus came into this world through the family line of David. But here, David refers to this descendant as his *Lord*.

In the Jewish culture, along with many others, ancestors were held in higher regard than their descendants. The Messiah they expected would be fully human. He’d be a descendant of David and would arise as a powerful military figure. The deliverance he would bring would be a military one.

But hang on: David himself calls this descendant his *Lord*, believing this Messiah to be *superior* to him. Now we come to the answer to the riddle: **for David’s descendant to be superior to him, he’d have to be more than a mere man.**

And Jesus wasn’t only teaching that the real Messiah would be superior to David. He was showing them that the rule this Messiah would introduce was of a different kind than David’s. He’d come to bring about a *spiritual* conquest, not a military one, and it’d be worldwide.

I’d suggest, when you get a chance, you read Psalm 110 Jesus quoted from. You’ll see the Christ being also described as a priest. And Jesus was to be a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Now hang on a minute: Melchizedek wasn’t even an Israelite. He was a Canaanite!

You’ll maybe see then how Jesus was disrupting their view of what the Messiah would be like. They’d read this Psalm perhaps hundreds of times. But Jesus is highlighting it and encouraging the people to think on it bit more.

- Firstly, he wanted them to see the Christ would be both priest and king, a dual role denied to all the kings in Israel’s history. He came not only to establish an eternal throne, but he was making himself an eternal High Priest, for ever doing away with the Jewish priesthood.
- Secondly, since his eternal priesthood is said to have a Gentile, Melchizedek, as its foundation, this hinted at Jesus becoming a great High Priest not just for Jews but for all the nations of the world.

The blindness of these teachers, especially since their Messiah was right in front of them, was part of their guilt before a holy God. In all these temple controversies, who were most obviously the enemies of God? It wasn’t the common people. The end of verse 37 says these were glad to hear Jesus’s teachings.

It’s always been a source of amazement to Bible students that those who’ll face the greatest wrath from God will be those considered by most to be the greatest servants of God. High priests punished more than heathens, and pastors more than pagans. Yes, even now, there are pulpits occupied by wolves in sheep’s clothing. They may hold onto congregations, sometimes even large ones, but the real sheep are scattered.

Brethren, be not children in understanding. Howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.

1 Corinthians 14:20

We who are believers are to pray constantly that the Holy Spirit would illuminate our minds and give us understanding of the Scriptures.

Humility versus haughtiness

The Christian is meant to be humble, not proud.

After the riddle of the Messiah, Jesus begins to criticise the religious leaders. All this might come as a surprise to the reader, considering Jesus has just been speaking to a scribe, and that conversation ended on hopeful note.

God had his elect among even the religious elite. In the Gospels, we come across some sympathetic ears among this class. But the wicked ones were clearly in the majority, such that Jesus felt able to warn the people about the religious teachers as a whole.

What were his criticisms?

- They were showing off in the way they dressed (v.38). Not that they were trying to outdo each other as if in a fashion show. Their garments were meant to make a religious statement, and they most certainly wanted to make a statement. They wanted people to know how important they were.
- They were coveting the adulation of the people (v.38, end). It was customary for people to show respect to these teachers when they passed them on the street. They should've received these tokens of respect with deep humility, not pride.
- They were highlighting their social status. In the synagogues, they'd seat themselves at the front, and at banquets they'd always be at the top table. They wanted everyone to know they were VIPs.
- They were trying to look spiritual. Verse 40 talks about their long prayers. They thought the longer and more sophisticated their prayers were, the more they'd be esteemed by the people. And this faulty motive rules out the possibility God was listening to them.

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you: they have their reward.

Matthew 6:5

Please bear in mind Jesus wasn't saying these habits were inherently sinful. **The problem was with the pride in their hearts.**

Modern evangelicalism shuns religious garb for the most part. But there are some Presbyterians and evangelical Anglicans who wear black smocks or sport dog collars. Don't forget that the Reformers and the well-known figures in the Great Awakening wore religious uniforms. I'm sure God wouldn't mind *me* wearing some special clothing when preaching as

long as my motive for doing so was good. **If I were to clothe myself outwardly with religious dress, I'd have to make doubly sure I was clothed inwardly with a meek spirit.**

It's not wrong for people to show respect to others. When I was teaching, my pupils would call me "sir". Some of you will occasionally address me as "pastor". During my time employed in a homeless hostel, residents would sometimes call me "boss". Now I'm not saying these were always used sincerely, but they're still accepted as expressions of respect to a person or their office.

Likewise, I'm to show respect to others. I've been in court rooms on many occasions. Sometimes, I was a member of the jury, and other times I was the accused(!) but I was always happy to address the judge as "Your Honour".

I believe it's good that people in society show each other respect. But when God looks down, *he expects you to receive respect in all humility*. You're not to desire adulation. The pastors, along with the teachers and judges, should be glad these marks of respect exist but at the same time consider themselves servants of everyone who shows them such respect.

When we think back to the conversation Jesus had with the scribe, it's apparent to us these elitists can't be taking those commandments seriously. It's impossible for them to claim they're obeying the instruction to love others as much as themselves when they're using others to boost their own egos. Listen to what the apostle Peter says to the believers:

Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

1 Peter 5:5

We should choose humility. Remember, as we foster a humble attitude in our dealings with others, it's in our relationship to God we should be most humble. We recall how great he is and how lowly we are. Our motto is to be like that of John the Baptist who said of Jesus, *He must increase, but I must decrease*.

Compassion versus cruelty

Following the example of our Lord Jesus, we're to aim for compassion in our dealings with people. And compassion is by definition kindness towards those who have a problem. It could be disease, pain, mental illness, hunger or debt.

The first mention of widows in our passage today is in v.40. In the list of Jesus's criticisms of the teachers we looked at earlier, I left out the one about "devouring" widows' houses. It's what it sounds like. In their business dealings, scribes and others would repossess houses, even of poor widows.

The fact Jesus mentioned this should be enough evidence this wasn't about a few isolated incidents. Men would take out mortgages to provide a home for their family. As you know, women live longer than men. When the male breadwinner died, the widow would

frequently have trouble keeping up with the mortgage payments, and the homes would be repossessed.

This practice was endemic. It had become part of their culture. And it was the rich religious leaders who both carried out and justified the practice. How far removed this was from “Love thy neighbour”!

The scribes weren’t paid for their teaching as such but relied on gifts from the people. Inevitably, their greed would cause them to do business immorally. James says this:

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

James 1:27

It’s one of the negative aspects of our capitalist society today, that people suffering genuine hardship have their homes taken from them by unbelievably wealthy businesses. But I was thinking about another practice we see today which has nothing to do with greedy bankers. People will create friendships with lonely, elderly people in the hope they’ll inherit something from them. Without a doubt, some of the religious leaders back then will have done likewise, befriending widows in order to inherit their houses.

It’s obvious we’re to have compassion on others. A few chapters back in Mark’s gospel we came across this:

I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days and have nothing to eat.

Mark 8:2

Compassion. Kindness. Care. Sympathy. And these are even to be shown towards those who hate us.

And as I said last time, we’re to develop this attitude even more with people within the kingdom of God. We’re to take the high standards expected of us in our charity towards our fellow man, then take it up a notch in our dealings with the brethren.

I know it can be tough. Within our churches we find people who are aggravating, critical, self-righteous and even plain old nasty. And obviously there are pastoral issues which need addressing there. But that doesn’t do away with your responsibility to be kind to those types of people.

Let’s continue to use Jesus as our example. Putting aside the compassion he showed in healing diseases and feeding people, his greatest act of compassion was directed towards his people, the ones he went to Calvary to save. And he knew very well how all the benefits of Calvary would be implanted in the hearts of people who *hated* God. I’m talking about us! Sinners.

Jesus saved one of the thieves he was crucified with. And we need look no further for a clear example of the compassion and grace of God. Jesus listened to his insults and scorn. And ten minutes later, he’d deliver to that man the kindest words that could ever be said. The man

repented, and all the verbal abuse he poured on Jesus was forgotten. Jesus promised him eternal life.

Generosity versus greed

Next, we see Jesus walking a short distance in the temple to have a sit down.

He positioned himself to have a clear view of the treasury. There were a number of large vessels people put their donations in. A bit like the collection boxes at the back of our churches. And he just sat and watched for a while.

The first thing he noticed is recorded for us in verse 41. There were plenty of rich people about. And they came to give money to the work of God. That's a good thing. And being rich they were able to make large donations.

Next, he sees a poor widow arrive. Although there's no evidence they knew each other as friends, Jesus clearly knew about her. All the money she owned in this world was clutched in the palm of her hand. It was her last pound. And she threw it into the collection box.

Jesus then calls over his disciples for an on-the-spot lesson. He describes what he's seen, then announces the old lady gave more than the rich people. The explanation is in verse 44. The rich gave away a small portion of their wealth, while the poor widow gave everything.

No one is arguing the rich people didn't give more in monetary terms. They no doubt gave thousands of times more than she did. And it's good they gave this money. Whether it's the old temples or the modern-day churches, most of the work carried out by the Lord's people requires money.

This doesn't apply to me, and it may not apply to you—I don't know—but God gives some of his people lots of money. Some Christians are very wealthy. Through legitimate work, God transfers wealth from the people of this world into the hands of a few Christians. And he does this so they can provide the bulk of the money the church needs.

There are no hard and fast rules that we can refer wealthy Christians to so they'll know how much they're supposed to give to the work of God. They can keep most of it, donate most of it, or anything in between. It's between them and God. But if you are in that privileged position, you should remember **the reason God gave you your wealth was not to give you a standard of living far above that of your fellow believers**. He directed that money to you so you could give lots of it away!

The issue Jesus raised here is therefore being played out in the modern church too. Believers with plenty of money will usually make larger offerings than others do. But more often than not, they remain wealthy after they've given. I'm not saying that's necessarily wrong. But Jesus here encourages us to think not about whether we've given more than others, but how much of a sacrifice it is to give what we do. There's a sober warning here given through the prophet Malachi:

Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, "Wherein have we robbed thee?" *In tithes and offerings.* Ye are cursed with a curse, for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation.

Malachi 3:8–9

If you remember the 80s, you might recall a collection of rock and pop icons getting together to form what was called *Band Aid*. They collaborated to release a song, and all the proceeds from the sales of the singles would go to charities fighting poverty in Africa.

I've always been very cynical about projects like this. Here was this huge gathering of ultrarich people trying to get relatively poor people to give money to charity. But those artists made real sacrifices: they gave a day of their time to record the single...

One of the founders of that project was Sir Bob Geldof. Now obviously, his wealth has increased since back then. But today, Geldof has a net worth of around \$150 million. I've no idea what the collective net worth of those singers was, but it would have run into billions. They showcased themselves as heroes fighting poverty. The truth is they could've all stayed home and wrote out huge cheques and instantly saved millions of lives.

Some of these stars do give money to charity...but they make sure you know about it. If they cared as much as they pretended to, they'd give more sacrificially.

The woman in our story did give sacrificially. As I've said, in today's money her offering would be about £1 or \$2. Now if everyone's weekly offering to the church was a pound, the churches wouldn't survive in their present form. But we need to take from this an important lesson: we must never be impressed by large offerings, and we must never despise small offerings.

The rich people in the temple went home that day still rich. The poor woman went home broke. It's amazing that this widow belonged to that class of people who we read in verse 40 was downtrodden, yet she's used as a model of sacrificial love for God. Her tiny offering would have meant nothing to the temple treasurers, but her act of generosity and love was, without her knowledge, to be recorded in the pages of God's word for the benefit of millions of God's people throughout history!

Let me make one more remark about this widow's offering. Students of the Bible have questioned whether or not this woman was being irresponsible in giving over her last penny. The truth is we don't know her situation. Whether or not she'd already paid the bills and had food in the cupboard is not the issue here. Even if she did go too far, her motive was love for God, and that's the point.

Brethren, it's none of my business how much you give for the work of the gospel. If you feel you can only give 1% of your income to the church, *give* 1%. If you can afford to give 90% of your income to the church, so be it. It would only become a pastoral matter for me if someone could afford to give something but chose to give nothing.

I'm going to draw this to a close shortly, but I need to make one final and important point. It's obvious that as believers we're not only to give our money to the Lord's work; we're to

give of *ourselves*. Our time. Our abilities. Our strength. *Our whole selves*, as we emphasised last week.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

Romans 12:1

The word “holy” here indicates you should understand you’ve been set apart from the mass of mankind to be used in God’s service. And your duty is to see to it your life reflects that reality. Make it your daily motto, *How am I going to serve God today?* Focus, brethren. Fight through that spiritual sluggishness and make every day count. You want some encouragement?

“Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse that there may be meat in mine house. And prove me now herewith” saith the LORD of hosts, “if I will not open you the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.”

Malachi 3:10

Our Lord Jesus Christ once again claims the title of the most generous person who’s ever lived. He gave himself in a way no one else could match. **For us**—we who are his followers—he lived, suffered and died.

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

2 Corinthians 8:9

He left the luxury of heaven to come to this disaster zone of planet Earth. And he owned nothing, except perhaps the clothes on his back. Speaking spiritually, he gave his all and thereby is classed as poverty stricken, and did this so that we, being poor in spirit, would receive the riches of his grace.

What a saviour!

Amen.