

Mark 12:38-44 "As he taught, Jesus said, 'Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.' Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on.'"

Christians often remark that the verses in the Bible most quoted to them are the words of Jesus, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matt. 7:1). People who are totally ignorant of the rest of the New Testament will quote those words to an evangelical believer to tell him or her to stop suggesting that other people might be confused, or that they might be sinners who needed a Savior. "Do not judge!" men say to us. There can be a church meeting in which some response to the ungodly conduct of a person is being carefully dealt with. Hours have been spent trying to restore this person but now things have just gone too far and the person is utterly defiant and unrepentant. It is suggested by the godly pastor that the procedures of Jesus in Matthew 18 be instigated in his case to try to restore this brother, but then a church member rises to his feet protesting; "Judge not or you'll be judged" he says. Do such misguided people think that the Lord Jesus gave us those commandments in Matthew 18 to be glanced at and then ignored? This is the divinely appointed way of bringing such a man back to God in repentance. The world is deluding itself if it dreams that Jesus wouldn't pass judgment on anyone. We are all hurtling towards the day of judgment when everyone who is made in God's image must appear before the Son of God. The Lord has made the event plain enough. The apostles tell us that it is appointed unto men once to die and after death the judgment. Notice in our text that Jesus is speaking judgment talk. There are those who say "Simply preach Christ, and then you'll never have to bother warning a congregation about false teachers. Magnify God before the people and you

won't have to tell them of wolves in sheep's clothing." There are those who say, "Simply get Holy Spirit baptism and you'll overcome any opposition." But this passage (and others like it, some much longer such as Matthew chapter 23) confronts us with the incarnation of the love of God and he is warning his hearers to watch out for certain men. He certainly centered his ministry on the kingdom of God, and he urged his followers to pray constantly, and yet he solemnly and frequently told them to keep their eyes open and consider the poor behavior of religious men. We are told that every true Christian is kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, but how does God keep us? One practical way is by noticing the conduct of evil men and fleeing from it. Jesus brought the bad example of such religious men to the minds of his servants.

So here in this passage of the Word of God we meet a Christ who himself passed judgment on men and women. We are told of a Christ who warned his disciples exactly what was going to happen to certain wicked people, that they "will be punished most severely" (v.40). Three chilling words, "punished most severely." There are of course millions of people who believe themselves to be more loving than Jesus of Nazareth. They aren't the kind of people who would punish anyone.

## 2. THE LORD WAS SPEAKING THESE WORDS TO HIS DISCIPLES.

The Lord Jesus was accompanied in the Temple by his own disciples. He was not speaking exclusively to worldly and ungodly men, but to those who had been with him for three years. He was addressing men who loved him, those apostles who would be the founders of the Christian church, the first preachers of salvation, and yet to them he said, "Watch out!" There is something very remarkable in this fact. We might have thought that these were the men least needing such a warning. Hadn't they given up everything for the sake of Christ? They had. Hadn't they endured hardship for Jesus? They had. Hadn't they been taught by him, transformed by him, followed and loved him, while the world was unbelieving? Yes, but these disciples were the very men he warned, "Watch out!" We might have thought that his disciples had least to fear from the teachers of the law. The Twelve were basically unlearned men, most of them

coming from the underclass in Galilean life; they had no leanings toward being scribes and lawyers; they were more likely to be prejudiced against such men than drawn towards them.

This is a solemn warning to everyone who professes to love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and to have followed him for years. The words of our Savior are saying to us that the most eminent servants of Christ are not beyond the need of warnings, and they are the ones who ought to be always on their guard. The holiest believer ought to walk humbly with his God, and to watch, and pray, in case he fall into temptation. None is so holy that he can spurn a message of warning. None is so mature that he may not fall - not finally, and not hopelessly, but to his own grief, and the sadness of the church and the triumph of the world. None is so strong that he might not be overcome. Christ was preaching to those given to him by the Father, chosen before the foundation of the world, justified by the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, indwelt by the Holy Ghost, kept by the power of God. Yes, but do you remember this, that believers are men only? Peter may still break fellowship with Gentile Christians and refuse to eat with them. Demas may still forsake the companionship of the apostle Paul through love of the world. The enemy of our souls is very busy; he never slumbers nor sleeps. Let us remember the falls of others and be humble lest we too fall.

Beware of pride. Pray that God will keep you from error. Remember that the twelve apostles were the chief amongst this group to whom Christ turned and said, "Watch out."

### 3. THE LORD WAS SPEAKING ABOUT THE BEHAVIOR OF RELIGIOUS MEN.

"Watch out for the teachers of the law," warns Christ. He didn't warn them about thieves and prostitutes and drunkards and murderers and racists and grasping capitalists. He didn't warn them about Gentile dogs and Roman soldiers. They'd have appreciated being reminded how wicked such people were. No doubt friendship with such men brought its own snares, but Jesus never singled out such people. He raised no warning voice against them. He confined his warning to one group alone, the

religious men of the nation; "Watch out for the teachers of the law." Who were these men? They were the scribes, the lawyers and teachers of religion. They were formalistic, worshippers of the fathers in Israel, self-righteous men. They attached such weight to the traditions of the rabbis that they practically regarded them as having more importance than the inspired writings of the Old Testament. They followed with an exacting strictness hundreds of rules and regulations which they considered to be the essence of true religion.

Why does Christ warn his disciples about them? Because all the nation considered them to be the models of religion, and Christ could see the subtle influence they might have over the Twelve apostles once fame and power became theirs in the church. The teachers of the law were impressive figures with their flowing robes and prominent seats in the synagogues and in the feasts. They could pray publicly for ages. How religious they seemed, but it was concerning these men that Jesus warned his disciples.

They didn't deny the inspiration of the Scriptures; they kept the law of Moses as it seemed to be in their understanding. Jesus speaks to one teacher of the law earlier in his chapter and tells him that he is not far from the kingdom of God. What is more within forty years Jerusalem with its temple would be destroyed, and the Jews scattered around the Mediterranean. Why did he bother to warn his disciples about them? He did so for the perpetual benefit of the church. In other words he said these words for you, and for me. He knew that there would always be teachers of the law in spirit even among among professing Christians. He knew that their succession would never fail; their generations would never become extinct, and that though the name 'teacher of the law' would be no more, their principles would always exist, and of course our Lord was right.

What of my heart? Do I have a teacher of the law firmly entrenched there? We look at the warning of the Lord and we see that there are three areas of our lives which we need to watch:

Watch out for ambition.

There is godly ambition isn't there? We talked about that in an earlier message. Paul's ambitions were to present his body a living sacrifice to God. His ambition was to live for Christ. Henry Martyn, the missionary to Iran, had a true spirit of ambition when he said as a young man in 1805, "I have hitherto lived to little purpose, more like a clod than a servant of God; now let me burn out for God." One of the most famous lady workers in India a hundred years later, Amy Carmichael, wrote these words in her most famous poem, Make Me Thy Fuel

"Give me the love that leads the way,  
The faith that nothing can dismay,  
The hope no disappointments tire,  
The passion that will burn like fire.  
Let me not sink to be a clod,  
Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God!"

Let us all be men and women of ambition, but let God determine what our ambitions should be. These teachers of the law looked no further than the honor which God alone gives. They loved to parade around in their fashionable flowing robes. These teachers of the law loved it when everyone sitting in a market or in a street got up when they came walking along. They loved the respectful greetings of men in public places. They didn't teach the Scriptures; they didn't exhort men to trust God with all their hearts and serve him. They used their selfish ambitions to promote themselves. How destructive it all is.

The rat race is quickly over. What has your ambition brought you? How vain is worldly ambition. We all have its seeds in our hearts; the itch for the name, the big house, the degree, the promotion, the big job, the big salary, the ache for all the symbols of success. How self-centered it all is. Beware of sinful ambition Jesus is saying to Peter and James and John and the rest.

Watch out for pride.

Here were men who loved to have the top places in the congregation and at the big banquets. They enjoyed rubbing shoulders with the top people.

.Dr. Lloyd-Jones has a sermon on the opening verses of Ephesians 2 on men fulfilling the lusts of the flesh and of the mind, and he "as I was preparing this sermon it filled me with a loathing and hatred of myself. I look back and I think of the hours I have wasted in mere talk and argumentation, and it was with one end only, simply to gain my point and to show how clever I was."

Shakespeare puts it like this,

"But man, proud man,  
Drest in a little brief authority,  
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd ,  
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,  
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven,  
As makes the angels weep." Measure For Measure Act 2: Scene 2

Christ has been speaking to them minutes earlier about loving their neighbors as themselves, but these religious men were putting love for self at the top of their list. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Pride can have such an effect on a man. The teachers of the law, needed to be dressed up in their flowing robes before they could deliver their lengthy prayers.

In 1950 Donald MacPhail was a slender 16 year-old schoolboy in Barvas when he was converted. A special prayer meeting was held in the police station in Barvas because the local policeman was an earnest Christian. In that meeting the boyish Donald was asked to lead in prayer. He got up and put his hands together like a child does, and in the silence he said, "Father!" The whole meeting was broken by one word from this shy country youth and the Spirit came upon them. Prayers are not measured by the clock but judged by the closeness to God of those who lead in prayer. Donald MacPhail went on to Bible college and he spent the rest of his life as a missionary in Yemen.

Watch out for greed.

"They devoured widows' houses" (v.40), said Jesus. They preyed on the lonely and the vulnerable; the wealthy widow was a target, but the poor widow too. These men masqueraded as the servants of God but in fact they were servants of greed.

Christ warns his disciples about the behavior of the teachers of the law, "watch out!"

and then he says to them, "Such men will be punished most severely" (v. 40). He's not talking about their own consciences condemning them, or the shame of society calling them a bunch of frauds. Christ is referring to Almighty God the Creator considering the behavior of his creatures, seeing the widow out on the street and a religious man, who has spoken in the name of God, living in her fine house. "He will be punished most severely," says Christ. Would you be delivered from God punishing you? Then hear what Christ is saying and do it!

#### 4. THE LORD SPOKE ABOUT THE CONDUCT OF ONE GODLY WOMAN.

The Lord moves on in the temple to a spot in the Court of the Women where people could sit down and watch one of the popular spectacles. In that court was situated the 'treasury' which consisted of a line of thirteen chests shaped like trumpets into which men and women deposited their offerings. In the Jewish document called the Mishna the different designations of these chests are listed, apparently one was for purchasing turtle doves, one was for purchasing pigeons, another was for wood for burning on the altar, and so on, but there were six that were labeled "free-will offerings."

The Lord Jesus was in Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover. Normally 50,000 people lived in Jerusalem but during these days there would be an additional 200,000 pilgrims. Some of them were both devout and generous. There was no paper currency in those days; everything was in coin. So a generous gift to the temple, a bag of money poured out, would rattle into the containers much to the delight of the spectators. Mark tells us Jesus watched many rich men who were actually throwing in large amounts. The crowd might have ooh'd and aah'd as what to them were the vast sums of money being poured into the treasury. Maybe a lifetime's wages for some of them would have been given in one heavy bag of money tossed into one of the trumpet.

But Christ said nothing at all at the sight and sound of the rich people's gifts. He watched everything. He knew their motives; he knew what was in man. He is watching us today and every day; when we are most conscious that God doesn't exist he, whose eye is on the sparrow, is watching us too.

Then a little widow stood in line, her clothes indicating her poverty. Mark calls her a "poor widow" as if widowhood were not a heavy enough burden to bear. There would be no pension for her. She'd have had to work from dawn to dusk to earn some money for her own daily bread and maybe also for her dependents or her aged parents.

She could think of a host of sensible reasons for not giving money to the Lord. Surely he knew she had to live. People depended on her. She needed food to get strength to work another day. Jesus says in the last words of the chapter that this money was all she had to live on. There were no public advantages to her for giving a couple of coins to the temple. So why give away what she needed herself so desperately, especially when there were rich people pouring thousands of coins every hour into the temple treasury? God would vindicate her decision wouldn't he? Everywhere you can meet religious folk who have found a dozen reasons for giving as little as they can to their local church.

This poor widow wasn't aware that as she approached the treasury she'd caught the eye of the most important person in the universe, that he was watching her, the only one that matters, God the Son. Jesus saw that she was holding two mites - one of those coins would have been her salary for her day's work. The coins were called 'leptas'; this was the smallest coin in circulation, and she proceeded to put both coins in the offering. They were too small to make any sound as they fell into the box. She could have put one in and bought food with the other, but she gave both. She wasn't putting in two copper coins; she was putting in everything! All that she had to live on she gave to God. She left her future with him. She showed radical trust in God; he would supply all her need. Does anyone think she starved by doing what she did? there is surely a certain recklessness or at least should be, about giving ourselves to the Lord. This widow gave everything to God because she loved him from her heart; she didn't give to get anything in return. She didn't think that if she gave two leptas to God he would give two hundred leptas to her. Word Faith/Prosperity theology was not around yet. She gave to get nothing in return, simply out of her devotion to him. Jesus said that she had put more into the treasury than all the others. She put in more than all of



Here is the extraordinary contrast in the verses of our text between some men and a poor widow. They were famous for their religion, while she wasn't. They had flowing robes while she had a poor widow's clothing. They sat in the most important seats in the synagogues and in places of honor at banquets while she stood with the poor folks at the back. They could throw into the treasury vast sums of money because they'd stolen the contents of widows' houses, while she put in two mites. They were going to be severely punished while she was going to be eternally blessed. On the day of judgment would you rather be a famous religious person or this woman? How do you measure real sacrifice? By what you give? No, by what you keep.

What was the fundamental difference between these men and this woman? The fundamental difference between them was not one of gender or income or fame; it was the difference between their hearts. What's going on in our hearts makes all the difference. God loves a cheerful giver and he hates a reluctant giver. I can give all that I possess and surrender my body to be burned, but if I don't have love I gain nothing. When a person gives out of a sense of obligation hoping that God will be merciful to him for doing that it is better for him to keep it. It is a privilege to give to God. What an honor that he might use our gifts as he pleases and to help us to give in a way that pleases him.

God can do great things with little things given to him. This poor widow, who so privately brings her insignificant offering to God, couldn't imagine that almost two thousand years later she would become one of the most famous people in the world. When millions of millionaires would be rotting in the ground she'd be living on in the memories of God's people .

There was once a missionary who was the son of a widow who went to work for Christ in west Africa. He was not there long before he contracted an illness and died. His brother was left at home and he came to his mother and said to her, "Mother I want to go and take my place where my brother once worked. I will preach to my brother's

people. I will tell them of my mother's and brother's God." And she bade him farewell and off he went to west Africa, and before long he too became ill and died, and his grave lies next to his brother's. When the news reached home that she had lost her second son many from her church came to see her and to sympathize, and often she wept with them and they tried to comfort her. "You understand my tears," she said. "I am weeping not that I have two sons dead in west Africa but because I don't have a third son I can send there."

Do you see what this passage is saying. You don't need religion you need a new heart. As Sinclair Ferguson says,

"God doesn't need your money. He requires no benefactors to help him establish his kingdom. Noting you can do or give will add to his riches, he owns the entire universe, and he can employ everything in it for his own holy purposes. Furthermore, he owns your money too. He is able to give it to you and withdraw it from you at a moment's notice. You are simply his steward. Anything you give to him he has first given to you, like a father giving pocket money to his children to help them buy his birthday present! "God chooses to use whatever gifts he wants to further his kingdom. he can use a small gift for a great purpose and a great gift for a small purpose! With a great gift, a massive organization may be set up which is in constant financial difficulties and eventually goes bankrupt; with a small gift, a Gospel, or a New Testament may be purchased which leads to the conversion of someone who wins many others to Christ, or is the instrument of a great revival - or, for that matter, points a millionaire to Christ! Jesus is underlining this in what he says. If we grasp it, we would never be proud of the amount we give." (Sinclair Ferguson, "Let's Study Mark," Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1999, p.209).