

Sermon Notes

Beware Those Who Devour | Mark 12:38–44
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I. Introduction

Jesus's words may be strange to some. The popular notion of our day is that we should just accept teachers. After all, if they are of God, do we dare question them?

God not only commanded Israel to discern whether someone came with a true word from the Lord; He commanded His people to put false prophets and dreamers of dreams to death (Dt 13:5; 18:20). The Lord not only said this; He said that He would also punish them. For instance, in Jeremiah 14:15, we read, "Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who are prophesying in My name, although it was not I who sent them—yet they keep saying, 'There will be no sword or famine in this land'—by sword and famine those prophets shall meet their end!" God condemns these prophets and even the priests of that day sought to heal "the brokenness of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace" (Jer 6:14). God was sending a negative message to elicit repentance, while those wanting to make people feel better gave false words from God.

It doesn't matter if the person comes with a positive or negative message. Paul warns that there are "false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds" (2 Cor 11:13–15). We read, "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 Jn 7).

We need to also be on guard inside the church. Jude 4 says, "For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." Paul warned the Ephesian elders that wolves would come in among the flock (Acts 20:29–31).

Part of the problem is our own, sinful inclination to want false teaching. In fact, the end-times is marked by those who can't endure sound teaching (2 Tm 4:3–4). Some who are in the faith will depart, embracing the doctrines of demons (1 Tm 4:1).

Jesus says there are many false teachers, and the scribes exemplify the markers of falsehood. They like to be noticed by people, and they liked money. Let's look at the first of those.

II. Beware those teachers who like to be noticed (vv. 38–40).

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

Matthew 23:1 says that Jesus addresses the crowds as well as the disciples here. So, he apparently turns away from the scribes to address everyone else gathered to listen. In Matthew, Luke, and here, He speaks of the scribes who "were the professional teachers of the current Judaism and were nearly all Pharisees."¹

¹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mk 12:38.

He commands them to beware, look out for, or watch for danger from the scribes. He will use the same command in the Greek of the next chapter, warning of the deceptions of false teachers, persecutions, and the last days (13:5, 9, 23, 33). He applies the warning to the scribes and Pharisees here. You may remember that He's given a similar warning before; in 8:15, He says, "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."

The warning isn't to watch out for them simply because they were scribes and Pharisees. He gives five markers to note and avoid. Whenever someone seems to fulfill these criteria, we must conclude that they only want to be noticed and are not as concerned with Lord as our leaders should be. Let's consider the first of those:

A. First, they like to walk around in long robes (v. 38).

God called priests to wear robes in the Law. These were white, linen robes that flowed and contained fringes. It appears, though, that in addition to the priests, scribes and others began wearing them.

The problem wasn't just that the religious were wearing robes. In the parallel passage, Jesus explains, "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments?" (Mt 23:5). In other words, they made intentional alterations to their robes to be more eye-catching, trying to signify their piety, education, and status.

Growing up Baptist, I had often wondered about folks who wore robes as they preached. However, in the Protestant Reformation, they adopted robes as a way of de-emphasizing the person. A plain, black robe would cause much of the preacher to fade into the background as he preached, leaving only a dispensable and interchangeable voice preaching that which should have center stage: Scripture.

While I'm not saying that I will don the robe while I preach, this important reversal to the pomp of the middle ages counters the current trends of the age. We have preachers dressing in expensive clothing and preaching behind plexiglass lecterns or music stands, so they can be more visible to the people. It's interesting that, in a move that is supposedly more authentic in modern preaching, the pastor finds himself more highlighted on stage than ever. While that in itself isn't proof of what Jesus addresses here, we must beware those who like the dressings of religion too much, whether they be robes, collars, vestments, suits, or even the hipster-wear of trendy church launcher.

B. Second, they like respectful greetings in the market places (v. 38).

All three parallel passages—here, Matthew 23:7, and Luke 20:46—have the term "respectful greetings." We're not talking about greetings in the genial sense of *hellos* or *good mornings*—that is just common courtesy. Specifically, we're talking about honorific titles.

In the parallel account, Jesus explains in more detail, giving instruction to His church: They like "being called Rabbi by men. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ" (Mt 23:7–10). They apparently preferred to be called Rabbi, father, and leaders.

We can think of immediate examples for today. It seems odd that any minister of God would allow and even encourage people to call him, "Father." The Pope himself has taken on all three names of the Trinity—the *alter Christos*, the vicar of Christ, and the Holy Father. So as to not pick on Catholics too much, we should also consider whether it is right to call a pastor *reverend*. Those of a more Charismatic persuasion may want to add more titles, such as *prophet* or *apostle*. It's not that we shouldn't use titles anymore, nor should we immediately rebuke someone for using an honorific in ignorance. However, if someone who seems to enjoy these greetings, then he is likely someone to beware.

C. Third, they like chief seats in the synagogues, banquets (v. 39)

This literally means the best or the most honored seats in synagogues and banquets. In the case of synagogues, this would be the seats nearest the chest containing the Torah scrolls. These seats were typically reserved for dignitaries and honored guests. A similar situation arose in Christian churches (James 2:3). One commentator notes, “As a mark of special piety, seats up in front while now the hypocrites present in church prefer the rear seats.”²

In the case of banquets, this would be the seat nearest the hosts of the banquet. Another commentator explains, “At a *deipnon*, an evening meal that was made festive by their being invited as guests, they considered it only proper that the most prominent reclining-places on the divans or couches should be accorded to them. The head place on each couch was at the extreme left; this was considered foremost because the person occupying it could overlook the entire table without throwing back his head or looking around. All these honors were no doubt abundantly accorded to them.”³

In either event, someone expecting the best seats whenever they arrive signal their view of themselves. This is no less true in religious leaders. If a teacher or pastor is constantly upset at the prospect of missing out on honors, then he is likely someone not worth following.

D. Fourth, they like to devour widows’ houses (v. 40).

They *eat up* or *consume* the houses of widows. Reformation Study Bible: “It was considered improper for anyone to receive a salary for interpreting the Scriptures. Consequently, they relied upon and sometimes took advantage of the hospitality of the people, among whom widows were especially vulnerable.” These abuses went beyond monetary embezzlements but also the appropriation of property. Another commentary says, “Terrible pictures of civil wrong by graft grabbing the homes of helpless widows. They inveigled widows into giving their homes to the temple and took it for themselves.”⁴

We will talk more about this one in a few minutes. Let’s move onto the last marker:

E. Fifth, they like offer long prayers for appearance’s sake (v. 40).

As in, hypocritically praying long prayers, engaging in the process only for show. Those with close walks with the Lord enjoy praying to Him, and those who want to pretend to have such a relationship will stretch out their prayers. The HCSB says, “just for show,” and the parallel in Mt 23:13-14 repeats the refrain, “hypocrites.”

Remember what our Lord said when teaching us on prayer. In Matthew 6:5–8, we read,

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you. And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

He then showed us a simple prayer that says everything we need to cover in prayer. We don’t need to impress anyone; in fact, it’s better to pray alone than to fall into the temptation of praying to impress others.

² A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mk 12:39.

³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 552.

⁴ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mk 12:40.

The scribes and Pharisees even prayed to be noticed. The sad fact is that this follows robbing widows. They likely engaged in these prayers to deceive the public, covering up their fleecing of widows and other sources of graft.

The God they are playing with will condemn them for their actions. Indeed, they will receive *greater* condemnation. James 3:1 says, “Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.” This is why, whenever someone tells us they want to be a Bible teacher, we try to impress upon them the weight of the task. This isn’t something to be done on a whim. Jesus pronounces *woes* on those who engage in this kind of activity (Mt 23:13–16).

Well, we see something else here by way of illustration. Let’s consider it together.

III. Beware those teachers who like money (vv. 40–44).

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

Jesus hasn’t necessarily moved to this location. The NASB seems to indicate this, but other translations seem to have Him just sitting there (HCSB)—something supported by the original language. Luke 21:1 says, “He looked up and saw,” indicating that He had been stationary. As such, Jesus needed to only turn from the crowd, look into the Court of Women, and use this illustration for His teaching.

The treasuries here were on the walls to the Court of Women, the innermost section of the temple that permitted Jewish women (Gentiles were not allowed in this courtyard). The offering boxes were available here in the courtyard so all could give, whether Jew or Gentile, male or female. The boxes were trumpet-shaped and provided a place for them to give their freewill offerings.

As He looks over here, He was taking note of how the giving was done. He notes how people give, a sermon in itself! For now, we’ll note His supernatural exercise of knowledge—He could tell who put in what, and He knew what the situation of the widow was when she gave.

Most were putting in copper coins, but the widow will put in the smallest of all change, the absolute smallest allowable contribution. Verse 42 says she “put in two lepta.” A lepton was a copper coin, but the smallest in circulation. It was roughly 1/64th of a day-labor’s wage. The HCSB dynamically renders this verse, “And a poor widow came and dropped in two tiny coins worth very little.” Even so, He notes in the remaining verses that she gave more proportionality than anyone else, for she gave everything she had.

She didn’t just put in all of a windfall or all of a single check, but all that she had to sustain her. She is not scolded for this act of faith. She shames all for the proportion of her giving—some gave much, but none the same percentage.

I struggle with this interpretation as a pastor. Ultimately, if this is the point of the passage, then I must conclude that it’s okay to ask you to drain your bank accounts for me. There are plenty of preachers out there willing to do just that, asking people to give until it hurts, and then give more. Also, we have a contextual difficulty—the verses right before this condemn the scribes, and the verses right after this predict the destruction of the temple.

However, despite the fact that preachers often hold her up as a model of giving, Jesus gives no command to follow her example. While He does mention the fact that she gave a greater proportion than the rich, He

doesn't say specifically whether that is good or bad in either Mark or in Luke. Both books, however, follow up Jesus's warning about the scribes devouring widows' houses with this account.

Consider why this widow had no more subsistence than this—why the scribes were willing to take such an offering, leaving her destitute. She would go home and have nothing to eat, but the scribes and priests would have plenty. In the Law of Moses, we read, “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan” (Ex 22:22); in Isaiah 1:17, God tells them, “Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Indeed, and let's consider what the Bible has to say about giving. Giving should come out of worship, and it's always freewill. For instance, in Exodus 25:1–2, God instructs Moses to take a collection for the tabernacle. The Lord says, “Tell the sons of Israel to raise a contribution for Me; from every man whose heart moves him you shall raise My contribution.” The free-will effort was so successful that Moses must later restrain the people from giving more (36:5–7). When do you ever hear of someone telling people, “We have enough! Please don't send us more money”?

In the law concerning the Feast of Weeks, Israel is commanded to give God “a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the LORD your God blesses you” (Dt 16:10). A few verses later, concerning the Feast of Booths, we read, “Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you” (v. 17).

Giving in Scripture indicates the heart of the individual. For instance, the sluggard is someone who constantly dreams about getting more wealth and possessions, but he never works and his constant desire will be his death. “All day long he is craving, while the righteous gives and does not hold back” (Pv 21:26). The difference between the righteous and the sluggard isn't the presence of wealth versus poverty, but the desire to be giving versus getting.

What Paul told the church of Corinth: 2 Cor 8:1–5: “Now, brethren, we *wish* to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, *they gave* of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and *this*, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.”

Notice that Paul wasn't pleading with the impoverished Macedonians to give, that God would bless them if they just gave a little. No; they were begging *him* to help. The term “begging” implies resistance, as well; Paul might have been saying, “You're new believers, and you're poor. No one expects this of you.” However, he says that they gave what they could—it was proportionate to what they had. Some even gave sacrificially—“beyond their ability.”

Now, can we imagine Paul saying, “That's not enough! They should have given *everything* they had, the greedy and worldly wretches! Their love of money is why they're so poor!” Isn't that 180 degrees from what Scripture teaches about giving?

He goes on in 9:7 to say, “Each one *must do* just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” This means that giving involves thoughtfulness, not just a feeling in the moment. Even so, after I've thoughtfully considered what I can give and write that check, I can give it cheerfully knowing it won't bankrupt me and it will bless others, to the glory of God.

There's more we can say here about giving, especially in regards to those of us with more money than this poor widow. We need to remember that the church collects money every week (1 Cor 16:2), and the one

who sows sparingly will reap sparingly (2 Cor 9:6). We should honor the Lord with our wealth (Pv 3:9), and we must not withhold good when it's in our power to act (v. 27). That's loving God and loving our neighbors. However, we're talking today about this poor widow.

This doesn't mean that there isn't an act of faith here on the part of the widow, but we're not told. It may be that she strongly believed it important to give in this way. It could be, though, that she felt this strongly because of desperation and false teaching—the concept that God will multiply her wealth if she gives the last two cents she has. False teachers engage in this tactic all the time, and you might even know someone who has been hurt by this kind of teaching. We don't know for certain *why* she gave, but we do know she was someone in need—and none of the wealth of the temple was taking care of her as it should have.

Jesus points this out while saying scribes “devour widows' houses.” They were taking advantage of the poor, scraping in every penny they could. Contrast this to how Paul later instructs Timothy—there should be a list of true widows who have no one else so the church can assist them (1 Tm 5:3–16).

True teachers of God's Word shouldn't care about being noticed, and they shouldn't care about money. God gives strict guidelines for those who lead His people (1 Tm 3:1–7; Ti 1:5–9). May we beware teachers that fall outside these clear guidelines.