

Lessons in the Light

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 12:35-44

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We continue in the Gospel of Mark. We do so this morning by looking together at a passage that forms what is to be in the Gospel of Mark the final piece of Jesus's public teaching. He continues to teach, but he does so in the confines of his relationships with the disciples. So what happens in these verses are his final public statement. This is the Lord getting closer to what his promised act was, in going to the cross. So the light of his messiahship, the light of his kingdom, is beginning to even teach more lessons, but these lessons are pointed.

What we will read this morning is the pointed nature of these lessons—turn things upside down. They are hard to hear for his audience, though some welcome it. But they are not easy lessons. And they have direct application for us. Even though he was addressing the religious leaders of his day, what they struggled with is very human. And even recognizing that it shows up in our everyday lives, we are tempted towards these same things.

So enable the Lord, then, to lead us this morning in these lessons of light drawn from Mark Chapter 12, verses 35-44. Hear now the Word of God.

³⁵ And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? ³⁶ David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared,
 'The Lord said to my Lord,
 Sit at my right hand,
 until I put your enemies under your feet.'

³⁷ David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" And the great throng heard him gladly.

³⁸ And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹ and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹ And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ 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." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Please again pray with me. Now, Lord, we ask you with humble hearts, teach us that we might hear. Strengthen us by your Spirit that we might follow. We ask you, Lord, to help us to see the beauty of Christ, that he is worthy of our worship, as we have already sung this morning. But because he is worthy to worship, he is

worthy to emulate. And because he has loved us with an everlasting love, we have all that we need to follow him. Teach us now these lessons, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So last week one of the things we learned was that there was at least one scribe who was willing to come to Jesus with an open heart, an open hand, to learn what is it, what is it that I am to follow, what is the most important commandment. He answered correctly. He responded to Jesus with the right kind of priority of understanding. Jesus told him indeed, you are close to the kingdom.

But now he turns to all these other scribes who were not coming to Jesus with open hearts or open minds, but who had been involved in trying to trap Jesus. In these final lessons to the public Jesus turns, and he does so—as you will see in the outline—he does so with **Correction**, he does so with **Criticism**, but then finally he ends with **Commendation**. **Correction, Criticism, and Commendation**.

First, **Correction**. In verses 35-37, you've heard me read of what seems to be an out of left field discussion as [Mark] says, 'As [Jesus] was teaching in the temple...' So what that tells us is we don't have the full context of what led him to at least begin to expand on what does it mean, in that he is the son of David. But Jesus, in teaching in the temple, dealing with the scribes, takes this opportunity to correct them. And in correcting them, he is confronting them, because they are the scribes. They were the ones who were teaching the people of God what the Word of God actually meant. So in other words they ought to have understood. They should have carefully interpreted the Scriptures. But the ones to should have known didn't know, and they were misleading the people of God.

So how does Jesus correct them? First he demonstrates by quoting from Psalm 110. This is important because of what Jesus is about to do. Let's go there. First, in verses 35 through 37 he says, "How can the scribes say that Christ is the son of David?" Said another way: How can the Messiah be called the son of David? because that is what *the Christ* meant. And he says David, being led by the Holy Spirit, in Psalm 10—which is what he quotes from. Psalm 110 and Psalm 111 were often treated as one Psalm, and it begins with these words: "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." So this is David writing about the Lord. And he says, "The Lord (the Father, God) says to my Lord (this is David speaking)—says to David's Lord, 'Sit at my right hand.'"

So what Jesus is bringing about is that the promised Messiah, the Christ, the Lord spoken about in Psalm 110, is far greater than you, the scribes, have taught. So you have misled the people of God. You have led them to believe that David is up here and that the coming Christ, the Messiah, is down here, and that his job was to return Israel to its former glory as it was under David. Jesus says no. That is not what is meant here. Which is why Jesus says, "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?" So they misinterpreted Psalm 110. They misled the people of God. And so, therefore, they believed that the coming Messiah was not quite as great as he was actually going to be.

So what does Jesus establish? First, in this correction he says King David has a Lord above him. So the Messiah, the Christ, was to be emulated, not David. David was seen as the great emulated character within the Old Testament, but Jesus is saying no, not David, but his Lord.

David knew this; Jesus tells us so. David, being led by the Holy Spirit, knew that this Christ, this Messiah, this Lord, would be above him.

And one more thing he says here: “Sit at my right hand.” So this is David, who is the king on the throne, speaking of God the Father, who says: The Lord, this Christ, will be seated at my right hand, God's right hand. So implied in this is that not only is he the Messiah, he is the divine Messiah, because to be seated at God's right hand is a divine position. So how can the Christ be the son of David? Yes, by lineage, but not in subjection to David. Rather, even David understood that King David had a greater Lord.

But not only did Jesus teach that the king has a Lord, it is that Christ the Lord will do more than merely bring nationalistic recovery to Israel. We know this because of what it says. “Sit at my right hand,” verse 36, “until I put your enemies under your feet.” So he is recalling the words of Psalm 110, which continues:

The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter.
 (Now here he's speaking of the Lord, the Messiah.
Rule in the midst of your enemies!
Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments;
from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours.
The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”
The Lord is at your right hand; he will scatter kings on the day of his wrath.
He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses.
He will shatter chiefs over the wide earth.
He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his hand.
[ESV, Psalm 110:2-7]

What is he saying? The Messiah is going to be far more than a leader of Israel. He will conquer the world in his redemption. It will not be one zip code; it will be the world.

So Jesus is correcting the very people who should have understood that David had a greater Lord, and that this Lord was going to do more than return Israel to davidic beauty. Rather, he was going to bring about redemption not only in Israel, but he was going to ring redemption to the world. Jesus is correcting those who should have known better.

But he doesn't end there. He doesn't end with correction. So he starts with where they should have taught correctly, and now he's going to how they live. He is now going to **Criticize** the ways in which—and this follows. If you miss who the Messiah is, that theology has legs. It will affect how you live in everyday life. It will affect how you view yourself. It will affect how you view others. It will affect your motivations. And it did so with the scribes.

How did it do so? Well, in verses 38-40 Jesus points out that these scribes are full of religious show. What does he tell us? They walk around in flowing robes. They love to walk through the market places, shake hands, look good, make long prayers. It was about serving themselves. They use their position and their religious authority to draw attention to themselves. So Jesus is bringing into the light the way—not only that they misunderstood the Scriptures, but how that

led to their lives in the world. And he says look at you. You're not serving the people of God; you're wanting the people of God to praise you. It was about religious show.

But more than that, they also use their position, as the passage tells us, to do something which seems very, very acutely worthy of criticism. Indeed, it would be condemnation. He says this. They take “the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who (the scribes) devour widows’ houses.” So we know from the historical writings that the scribes, while having great honor, while having position—and certainly using that position for their own religious show—they were also a group of people who were not particularly wealthy. They were not themselves living in lavish houses. But what they did do was—because they were oftentimes living hand to mouth—they would teach others that if you took in a scribe, that if you fed those who had need, then your piety would be recognized by God.

It's a form of health and wealth gospel. If you do this, then good things will come to you. So one thing to do is to go to the most vulnerable. And so they would go to widows’ homes, knowing that they had a position of authority and power, and would ask to be fed. And these widows, desiring to have their piety increased to receive blessing from God, would entertain them. And so which is why this idea of ‘devouring’ their houses. They went there to feed their own stomachs, because they wanted the position to serve themselves. So instead of using their position to give to those who had need—which is what the Old Testament would call for—they used it as a position for themselves.

This would lead, not just to mere criticism of religious show, of taking advantage—it would lead to what Jesus says is condemnation. “They will receive the greater condemnation.” Which could be said this way. If in their earthly lives they used their position, which was to be used to correctly instruct the people of God about the coming Messiah—because they missed that, then used their position to feed their own stomachs, because they wanted to be the focus of attention in life—they will get their reward in this life, but they will become the focus of God's wrath at judgment.

Here is the reality. In the short run there will be those who use their positions to gain great reward, and in the short run, in this life, they often will win. But that's the only reward they receive. The more we seek to gain attention, to feed ourselves, to use others to get ahead, in this life you actually will get ahead. But what this passage tells us—while it is focused on the religious leaders—they'll be the first in line to receive the attention of God's wrath. The same is the case if what we seek in this life is earthly reward, earthly position—and that is what we call what we seek for—and we jettison the call of the gospel and reject Christ and his grace, then those, too, will receive wrath from God at judgment.

This is the Lord's difficult teaching. He's just looked at the scribes and said do you see what you are doing? You receive your reward, you think, now. But you will receive wrath and condemnation—indeed, he says greater condemnation.

What would be a way to avoid that? What would the scribes have needed to do to understand and follow Jesus? How do we get from a place of so easily serving ourselves to serving others? I'm not using my position for self-aggrandizement, but giving away. Well, one way would be religion. Religion might say well, just give more, serve more, do a little bit more, and that things

will go well with you. The other way is simply to avoid and reject this teaching altogether and simply say hey, look, I'm completely OK with receiving a reward in this life.

But the ironic thing is more money, more position, doesn't actually bring what it promises: happiness. Do you know that one of the fastest areas of growth in psychology is happiness psychology? Of why it is people are not happy and what it is they can do to become more happy. That isn't a slam on psychology, it's just a recognition: If we're wealthier than we've ever been, then why are we plagued with anxiety and worry, fear, longing. Is it because, as Bono, the great poet once said (sorry, I'm a kid of the 80's): Sweet the sin, but bitter the taste. When we receive what we've been longing for, it tastes so good. But it always over promises, but under delivers. We keep needing to go back for more. And when we think we have enough, we're afraid of losing it.

As one writer said these words: How can we escape being self-interested, self-focused and self-centered? How can we become truly unselfish? The answer is we need to look to somewhere else besides ourselves. We need to look, indeed, to Jesus. If he is a substitutionary sacrifice, if he has paid for our sins, if he is proved to our insecure, skittish little hearts that we are worth everything to him, then we have everything we need in him. It's all a gift of grace. We don't do good things in order to connect to God or to feel better about ourselves. What a meagre upgrade to our self-image all of our good deeds would actually bring, compared with what we receive from understanding why Jesus died for us and how much he loves us. If you really understand the cross, then you are blasted into the world in joyful humility. Now you do not need to help people, but you want to help them. To resemble the one who did so much for you, to bring him delight. Whether you think they are worthy of your service doesn't ever come in to the light. Only the gospel gives us a motivation for unselfish living that doesn't rob you of the benefits of unselfishness, even as you enact it. Only the gospel can give us the motivation for unselfish living.

Jesus, and not David. The Lord, the Christ, is the one to be emulated, but he cannot be, unless we first see how he emulates no one. He is the Christ who came and did for us—loving us to the bottom, knowing us completely and fully, giving us a deep reservoir of grace and love to turn to one another in love and self-giving.

Which is why Jesus closes with **Commendation**. Now as the Temple is set up, there are several places throughout the temple where there would be boxes, and you were to bring your offering to those boxes. Now generally each one of those boxes was manned by someone who was a leader in the temple, generally a scribe. And so what would happen is you announce the size of your gift and you place it in the box. That was the practice. Now it seems that Jesus didn't hear this, he actually was close enough to witness it. So he was close enough to one of these treasuries that he witnessed these things. And the passage tells us: "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." He calls his disciples to him and he says 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 contributed all that they gave out of their abundance, but she gave out of her poverty and has put in everything she had—all she had—to live on."

One commentary sums that this way. Contrary to popular opinion, large gifts in the Old

Testament did not merit favor with God. Abundant giving often creates a sense of self-satisfaction. So what they were doing by giving these large sums and announcing it—it wasn't that they believed they were earning favor and merit before God. No, what they were doing is earning merit for themselves in their own understanding. Aren't I an abundant giver? So it says that abundant giving often creates a sense of self-satisfaction and the opinion that God is lucky to have a rich and generous person on his side. Lord, I'm on your side. Not that it gained merit from God, but it gave a sense of self-importance.

And so Jesus exposes the pretentious nature of these attitudes. By holding up the widow as an example to emulate, Jesus demonstrates where true value lies. It consists of living a life of extravagance toward God, giving one's all to him without reservation. Her whole-hearted commitment to God and determination to withhold nothing is what is being exalted. Others gave what they could not miss. Others gave from what they believe they would not miss. She gives all that she has, becoming totally dependent upon God.

But let me be clear. The answer isn't we're going to pass around the basket one more time and you're just going to dump everything in it. The answer is not, literally, you're asked to give everything. But the question is recognizing that our giving is to a degree a very large picture of our trust and dependence on God. Our giving ought not to be motivated by the fact that God is impressed with the largess of our giving. What God desires is not a large check, but a heart that is giving in thankfulness and says all of this comes from you.

Leave it to us to turn giving into a math formula, a percentage. Before taxes or after taxes? Into the year or beginning of the year or regularly throughout the year? Should I use a check or should I put in cash? Is it OK to use it as a tax deductible thing, and what would I do if that was removed? We have... and these are OK questions to ask. But if that's where we stop, we miss the whole point of giving.

I do not know what one single person in this congregation gives. I'm thankful to say that has always been a philosophy of ministry for me, because I don't want to know. Because that is between you and the Lord. But what I do know, is that what enables my worship is when I'm able to look at the love of God, and you're able to look at the love of God, and our giving becomes not a formula of math, but the result of thanksgiving. That everything we have—the breath in our lungs, the cars we got into to get here, the clothes that we wear—everything we have is all from him. It all belongs to him, every bit of it. And that is not reflected in the size of the gift. It is the position and attitude of our hearts. And only the Lord knows that in yours; he only knows it in mine.

And so it is with this reality—as Jesus commends not the size of her gift, but its statement of trust in her heart—that Jesus calls us to see that he is the great Lord, the Messiah, who is about to give everything for our sin, that we might receive redemption. How does that motivate our giving?

I close with this illustration from Tim Keller's book, *The King's Cross*, about the Gospel of Mark. Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, a German nobleman who was born into great power and privilege and lived from 1700 to 1760, was one of the founders of the Moravian church. Over the years he spent his wealth down to practically zero doing good deeds, pouring himself out for others. But why? What happened? What motivated him to be so radical in his giving? He

told the story that as a young man of nineteen he was sent to visit the capital cities of Europe in order to complete his education. One day he found himself in an art gallery of Dusseldorf, gazing at Dominica Feti's "Ecce Homo," a portrait of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns. This image of the suffering Lord was very moving to Zinzendorf. Underneath this painting the artist had penned an inscription, words that Jesus might say to any one of us. And it says, "All this I did for thee. What dost thou for me?"

It is never to earn favor, but we bask in the rich grace and love of the one who gave everything. And so all that we have—it's his. It's his Howard County. It's his central Maryland. All of it is his. May we bask in the richness of his love and grace to free us from fear, insecurity, anxiety and seeking after greatness in this life. May it enable us to be a people who love radically, who give generously—even if it's the Lord who only knows it, for his glory and to demonstrate his love to others. May he do that, CPC, in all of us.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we say to you, we do long for more. We see nicer houses, we see better addresses, we see nicer cars, we see better success. We, in our quiet moments, we desire these things and maybe many other things. Lord, we ask that you would help us to see that your love can never be calculated, can never be measured, but it can be received. And as the Church of Jesus Christ and those who profess faith in Christ here, by your Holy Spirit, make us a people motivated by that gift. That you have done all of this for us, and we can't wait to give it away, because your grace knows no exhaustion, your provision is a promise. It may not be cash in our hands, but you have provided. And we can testify that you have provided. We didn't always know how, and even now we don't know how you always provide. But this we do know: While we were yet your enemies you provided Jesus. And if that is what you have done, what more do we really, really need. Now we ask, make us a people rich in grace, to give richness of praise, to love others. Help us we pray by your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.