

The Messiah, the Scribe, and the Widow.
Mark 12: 35-44

Song: Jesus paid it all

Psalm 51

Philipians 4

Responsive: Psalm 33:1-9

This week we are finishing up Mark chapter 12, this morning we are continuing the discourse that Jesus is having while in the temple in Jerusalem. Now in the previous accounts that we have covered over the past few weeks Jesus was talking to men from the Sanhedrin, some who came to set a trap of sorts in what they considered to be a well devised line of questioning. Last week was the account of the scribe who had heard Jesus answer to the Sadducee's and was impressed by his wisdom that he asked Jesus a question unlike the others meant to deceive and trap, but rather one of his own curiosity.

As we know the Sanhedrin was made up of 3 main groups, the Pharisee's, the Sadducee's, and the Scribes, and we have now seen that Jesus has been confronted by members of each of these groups and each time it was they who walked away looking foolish. After the last account with the Scribe, Mark records in verse 34 “ But after that no one dared question him.” The wording of this sentence here is put in a way that it is unquestioned, and it signifies that Jesus' ministry has not been hindered by these men, but rather it shows that he has prevailed over every challenge that they brought to him while seeking to discredit and turn the people against him. Jesus has bested each part of the Sanhedrin and they have given up the debate. But Jesus does not stop there, rather he takes the momentum, seizes the moment and goes on the offensive that we see in our passage this morning. So let us read this morning Mark 12:35-44

So right off the bat, in verse 35 Jesus jumps right to the source of the debate and the argument. Remember last week when he was talking to the scribe and the scribe affirmed what he had said about which commandments were central, to which all other commandments hung on Jesus responded to him by tell him “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” And the distinction there being that he denied Christ as the promised Messiah, it is this denial that put him outside of the Kingdom of God. The Scribe understood the old covenant, and the laws and traditions pointed to something greater, something better, yet when faced with the fulfillment of those shadowy examples he rejected him.

In our passage this morning we catch up to Jesus who is now teaching in the temple, and he takes on the subject of his messiah ship. In this account we must first make the distinction as to what it is meant by he taught in the temple, for as we know the temple in Jerusalem was made up of multiple parts, as we have seen with the account of Jesus throwing out the money changers and merchants previously. In this account here though, the greek text simple says that he was teaching in the temple, not in the temple courts, or outer area, but in the temple itself. This is the religious center of Israel, and it was the seat of the Sanhedrin's authority, it was here that policy was determined, and executed. It is here, in the temple, in front of the Religious authority of Israel that Jesus teaches and brings up the issue of his messiah ship. It is here he challenges the authority on their understanding of the Torah.

This setting, and subject here is just like the parable of the vineyard, in which Jesus spoke of the Son of God in relation to Israel's rulers and it is also the issue that arose with his Disciples as they traveled on the Road to Caesarea Philippi.

The difference was that it was not the time for Jesus to be revealed as the messiah, he taught in parables so the message was shrouded and could not be heard by those who it was not giving the ability to hear and to understand. And later he reveals himself to his disciples but it is only to them. Here it is different because he is taking this aggressive stance, and admitting openly that he is the one the prophets foretold, and that all of scripture was pointing to.

Just a cursory reading through of this text seems to be a bit confusing when trying to determine what it is exactly that Jesus is trying to get at here. He is posing a question in the format just like the Scribe did previously, this question echoes back to the scribes rabbinic exegetical traits. Much like in the question about the resurrection by the Sadducees, or the question on which commandment is central he posed this question to challenge their understanding of what it is meant in the book of Psalms chapter 110 which he is quoting here when it says, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool.

He invites those who are listening to reconsider whether the title Son of David is adequate enough to explain the Messiah. At this time it has become the common understanding among the Jewish people that this text, and others like it were a reference to the Messiah to come. In verse 36 before Jesus quotes the passage in Psalms, he prefaced it by saying David himself said by the holy spirit. This allusion to the holy spirit is to draw the attention of his listeners, that what is said is divine inspiration of the text, this statement is to convince his hearers that this text, and the point that he draws from it bears the weight of divine revelation. This is not just some esoteric argument, or debate but a divine revelation of the Messiah.

The text that he quotes from Psalms was originally a coronation hymn that would have been sung at the inauguration of the kings of Judah and Israel. To understand this better, we need to look at the original Hebrew which makes a distinction that is not found here in our English language which is what makes this text seem to be a bit muddled. Originally this quotation of Psalms would have read more like, "Yahweh, declared to my adonai." Or essentially, The Lord God, declared to the king, that is the king of Israel who was to be inducted as God's agent and seated symbolically at God's right hand. Being at the right hand of God signified honor and closeness to God and the legitimacy of his rule and dominion and justice over Israel. But the Israelite monarchy had been destroyed in 586 BC so this passage in Psalms became re appropriated with the rights of the king being transferred and understood as being the Messiah, since the promises that the kingdom of David would not fall, then these passages must have been meant for more than just King David and his physical descendants, thus by the time that Jesus is here in Jerusalem it was understood that the Son of David as pertaining to the kingdom of Israel and God would be the Messiah.

The implications of this answers the question that Jesus is posing as to whether the term Son of David is adequate enough to describe the Messiah. The implied fact here in this writing of David if God said to the Messiah, Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet. then the Messiah is obviously superior to King David, and he is not merely going to be just a descendant of the house of David as was widely believed at that time in Israel, but rather he is something more, the king of a better kingdom. This is much like the argument that Jesus made in the previous passage we looked at last week with the Sadducees. It was widely believed that the afterlife was an extension, and holy version of this same life but as we saw in Jesus response the afterlife isn't just a continuation, but rather something new, it is the same with the Messiah. Jesus is not just merely an extension of the Davidic kingdom, indeed he is a descendant of David, but he surpasses David's lineage. The term Son of David does indeed assert certain truths and is a valid description of Jesus but it falls short in many ways not completely revealing Jesus true identity.

In verse 37, Jesus poses the question, how is it that the Messiah can be David's son, if indeed the Messiah is greater, well the answer we already know. It is simply because Jesus is not just the Son of David, he is the Son of God. And notice at the end of verse 37 says, "And the common people heard him gladly." This was the problem that the Sanhedrin, the leaders in Israel were having. Their authority, their respect was being undermined by Jesus. He was a threat to them, to their way of life, and to the control they had over the people. It is no surprise that they sought to have him destroyed, but were also afraid of the response of the people if they did so. They had to be careful that he wouldn't be seen as a martyr, only furthering his influence.

In the following verse we can see that Jesus is becoming more and more aggressive, instead of teaching to the multitudes in the streets, and in the fields, he is standing in the temple and warning the people about the Scribes. Verse 38. "Then he said to them in his teaching, Beware of the scribes who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at the feasts, who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation." This last section of Chapter 12 here marks the final record of Jesus public teaching in the book of Mark. And he makes an example of these religious leaders, in contrast to the widow, continuing on in verse 41. "Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which makes a quadrans. So he called his disciples to himself and said to them. Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood.

Now there are many people who have used this text to talk about tithes and offerings, about faithful giving. And there is much truth to that. Jesus points out the faith of a widow who is overshadowed by the rich, by the mighty. Jesus sees the faithfulness of his children, in even the smallest things, in the things that the world sees as insignificant. But it isn't the giving of tithes here that is the real issue, it is the faithfulness of this widow in comparison to scribes that he mentioned in the previous verses. He sees and makes a comparison between those who are prideful, who love to make a show of their giving, who love to appear righteous and holy in their long fancy robes, and who like to make a great spectacle of themselves in the marketplaces. And this poor widow, who quietly, maybe even seeking to sneak it in to not draw attention to herself gives all that she has.

Jesus describing the scribes reveals the true motive, and purpose behind what they do. It is not out of worship, but it is out of pride and seeking to elevate oneself. The scribes commanded unrivaled authority in Israel. Their flowing robes were full length prayer shawls with tassels attached to the four corners which would stand out in contrast against the colorful common Jewish dress at the time. These robes were usually made of wool, or linen and it distinguished these men as men of wealth, and influence. And of course those who have a high self worth, always believe that they deserve the best, so they would find the best seats in the synagogues. These seats were benches that were along the walls of the synagogues, toward the front and they would face out toward the congregation of people who would sit on the floor in the middle of the synagogue. These first seats as they were referred to, were reserved for teachers and persons of rank.

Studying this, and reviewing this only further solidifies things that we do in our church culture today as seemingly offensive to me. There are things that I have always felt a little odd and uncomfortable with and I think that many churches in our culture commit this very same thing as the scribes do here. We see special chairs behind the pulpit for the leaders of the church, often times the pastor's is just a little fancier than the others who sit there, and they sit, front and center overlooking, and usually looking down upon the congregation due to the elevated stage they are on. This has always felt weird and uncomfortable to me, and now having studied this here, and seeing Jesus scathing remarks only solidifies my thoughts about them. Now I don't mean to say that every church across the country is committing these errors. I am sure there are many who have not given this a second thought how this appears, having the elders and leaders of the church in throne like chairs sitting toward the congregation like a king addressing his subjects. Every example we see in scripture of the ministry of Jesus, the disciples, and the apostles is one of servitude, being among the people, serving the people, witnessing, and ministering to the sick, the elderly and the widows. Maybe it's just me, and I will qualify it as my own thoughts toward such things but I still think that we need to make sure that we do not elevate, or make celebrities out of men, and hold them to high esteem over others. This is something it seems that we as humans do naturally, and it doesn't seem to be much different in the Christian faith sometimes and it's just something that we need to be wary of.

So, now that my little rant is over, continuing on here, the final statement about scribes here Jesus says is that they devour widow's houses and for a pretense make long prayers. So the question comes up, how do they devour widows' houses, and what does he mean by that? The historian Josephus wrote of an account of a Jewish man who was in exile to Rome who as he said "Played the part of an interpreter of the Mosaic Law and its wisdom" and in doing so succeeded in persuading a high standing woman named Fulvia to make large gifts to the temple in Jerusalem. It was such a practice that Jesus was likely talking about in this statement and also this reference would have likely struck home to Mark's Roman readers since this Fulvia scandal that Josephus writes about would be a recent memory and give a special frame of reference for the practice of the scribes. Unlike the Sadducees the scribes themselves were not inherently wealthy, but rather relied upon donations to the temple and it would seem that there were many, if not at least a large enough amount to be mentioned who took advantage of their position of authority and exploited and abused the generosity and faithfulness of others.

This is another thing we see in the so-called Christian faith today is it not? People abusing their power and celebrity status encouraging people, usually the poor, to send in money to be blessed. Jesus' judgement upon those who practice religion for their own personal gain, glory and self advancement is pretty blunt and straightforward. There is no hidden meaning or parable here in his teaching, he says, for these people they will receive greater condemnation. They will be severely punished. As we have already seen, with the discourse with the Scribe, Jesus has defined the centrality of true faith to be the Love of God, and the Love of neighbor. It is on these 2 points that the totality of the law stands. What the scribes practice here, and what we often see today is the complete and total opposite of this. These people are causing harm to others to further themselves. Taking advantage of the poor widow who gives all that she has so they can live a life of wealth and ease.

After this scathing rebuke of the practice of the scribes closing out chapter 12 here Jesus closes with a positive example of true faithfulness, the widow and her 2 coins. The coins that she deposited are of the lowest denomination that was available, in modern terms she basically put in 2 pennies and she is praised by Jesus for doing such because unlike the rich and the wealthy who give a tithe, sometimes in flashy showy amounts, this woman quietly gave not out of her abundance, but out of her poverty.

As we can see in the last verse here, Jesus said that this widow has put in all that she had, her whole livelihood. Now as we know, this verse has been abused to pastors in many different ways, not unlike the Scribes who Jesus said “devoured widows houses.” I do not believe that this passage here should be used to justify any sort of amount of giving as some may make it to be. Telling people to give all that they can to the church and rely on God to provide, or others instructing their congregation to give a “faith” offering, pledge to give an amount above what you can do and God will provide the means. That is not the message here at all, it misses the point, which is this woman's faithfulness and her willingness to give her all, not because she has been coerced to do so, but because of her faith.

These 2 pennies that she put in amounts to nothing when compared to the monetary value of the offerings, yet Jesus saw, God knows and it is this faithfulness that amounts to more than all the gold, and silver given. What we can take from this passage is that for Jesus, the value of the gift is not important, but it is the cost to the giver. Where is their heart, what is their motive and purpose. Are they giving because they love God, and because of a love they have for their brothers and sisters? Or are they giving out of some sort of rule, or obligation, or worse yet, giving for their own advantage. Tax write offs, or recognition. God's concern is of the heart, not of the amount. As we know the heart is always God's concern, as we studied in James, you can have good works, but if your heart is not in the right place they do not amount to anything in God's economy.

This account of the widow ends Mark's account of Jesus' public ministry. This example of this faithful widow giving all that she had harkens back to Jesus' calling of his disciples. He called them to leave their families, their livelihoods, their friends, to leave everything and follow him and we see this faith fully realized here as well in the giving of the 2 pennies. It shows a dedicated, undivided heart. This widow stands as an example of model discipleship. There is no gift, whether money, time or talent that is too small if it is given to God in faith. Is this not what Jesus did for us? He gave his life on the cross so that we may be reconciled to God. This account here is not about giving of tithes and offerings, but rather it is about sacrificing oneself to God, giving our all, to the one who gave his all for us. Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe, sin had left a guilty stain, He washed it white as snow.