

74 Mark 12:38-44

Woes & Widows

Text

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.”

Introduction

Throughout Mark's gospel there has been a lot of talk about the kingdom of God and particularly about the nature and character of kingdom citizens. In chapter 1 John came preaching repentance. Thus repentance needs to characterize kingdom citizens. Jesus, after John's arrest, began preaching the gospel (good news) of the kingdom. This suggested that the kingdom of God may include suffering. Jesus also preached repentance for the kingdom of God is at hand. The choice of the 12 and the criticism of the Scribes and Pharisees in ch 2 indicate that among kingdom citizens, not many of them are wise, not many of them are rich. In ch 3 Jesus defines family membership, not by blood, but by obedience to the will of God.

In chapter 4 Jesus gives a series of parables specifically on the kingdom of God. In those parables we learn that this kingdom age will experience mixed reactions like the parable of the seeds. The form of the kingdom may seem counter-intuitive like the lamp under the basket, but it will all be revealed in due time. The growth of the kingdom is mysterious. It starts off small but explodes into the largest plant in the garden.

Jesus gives three predictions regarding his death. If that is how the king will be treated, what of his citizens? There is much talk by his disciples about being great. But Jesus said the first must be last and the greatest must be the servant of all. To enter the kingdom you must receive it as a child. Acts of service beget rewards. The rich and self-righteous are not the followers of Christ. Following him may mean losing brothers and mothers and land but the first will be last, and the last first. Leaders in the kingdom will not lord it over people but will instead be servants. Those who are desperate for religion receive scorching criticism from Christ, but those who are desperate for Jesus receive healing. The greatest commandment is love of God.

Before us this morning we have two examples. One of lowliness and self-sacrifice and another of pride and importance and self-image. One exemplifies a kingdom citizen and the other does not.

One demonstrates the great commandment and one does not. One shows what it means to be in the family of God and one does not.

A Descriptive Warning

38 And in his teaching he said,

Verse 38 begins with "In his teaching" which indicates that this is just a small part of a larger discourse that Jesus gave. There are similarities in this passage to what Matthew records in his 23 chapter. It is possible that what Mark here records is just a summary of the the seven woes on the Pharisees that Jesus gives in his fifth mathean discourse. In fact, now is a good time for me to make a request of you. Beginning next week we are going to go through one of the most difficult to understand portions of scripture. In preparation for that I would like each of you to read through Mark 13 two times over the next week. If you desire to read beyond that (such as study Bible notes or commentaries) please do. But at a minimum, please read through that chapter twice. I mention that here because those woe passages that Matthew records, and which Mark here summarizes, aid in the interpretation of ch 13.

“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.

The long robes and tassels and all the religious garb recalls to mind some of the ostentatious displays of wealth in those who claim the name of Christ. It is not sinful for a Christian to be wealthy. I hope you understand that. But flagrant displays of it do seem to be out of line. I am not the one bringing a condemnation against this display. It is Jesus who mentions the clothing. There was a heart behind the clothing that made it inappropriate. There was a desire for recognition. Whether a recognition of wealth or of status, it doesn't matter.

Jesus continues the list by mentioning the marketplace scenes. James Edwards reveals the cultural fact that

When a scribe walked down a street or passed through a marketplace, everyone (with the exception of laborers) was expected to rise before him. Such position and privilege fostered the desire to make an impression. (Edwards, 378).

In our anti-authoritarian society there is little chance of this. But the salient point is whether you have a heart that desires it for yourself.

Jesus continues to paint this picture of scribal self-aggrandizement by mentioning the seats of honor. There were benches along the walls of the synagogues and some that faced the congregation. From these seats of prominence the scribes could watch all the people. It occurred to me that this description is strikingly akin to these seats that we have in the front of our church. They are at the front. They are elevated. They face the congregation. I understand that there can be a function of convenience from which people may rise and address the congregation. But too often it serves as a place where everyone can gaze upon those who are really important in the church.

When the important men of Jerusalem gave a feast they considered it an ornament to the feast to have a distinguished scribe and his pupils there. (Lane, 440).

It is unknown exactly how the scribes may have "devoured widow's houses." We know enough of the culture that some have ventured a guess that looks similar to the abuse of the televangelists

of today. Here are these men and women with multi-million dollar homes, private jets, expensive suits, etc, asking for money from those who are dirt poor that watch their program. They are like a modern day Tetzal. Except instead of selling indulgences they are selling prosperity. It is possible that the scribes (who received their wages from the people just like preachers today) abused their position such that they essentially devoured or consumed the precious few resources that these widows had.

The Judgment

They will receive the greater condemnation.

This verse indicates that there will be different degrees of punishment. I do not know how that works itself out, but it appears that there are variations of punishment. Jesus identifies these scribes as the kind of people who will receive the greater condemnation. This is a stern rebuke against anyone who would use religion for the purpose of self-advancement. John Calvin comments:

we know how much ambition prevails among men, according to what James intimates, that many wish to be teachers, (James 3:1) and there is hardly one who is not anxious to be listened to.

A Contrasting Example

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.

The massive amount of money that was represented in the temple, stored in the temple, and currently being put into the offering boxes was staggering and stands in sharp contrast to the smallness of the widow's offering.

In fact, the entire story stands in contrast to the scribes and their way of life. You remember the rich young ruler and the way he sought for salvation. Later in that same chapter was poor blind Bartimaeus. What a contrast that served! The way the rich young ruler sought eternal life, and the way the blind beggar sought for Jesus. A similar contrast is shown here between the scribes on one hand and this widow on the other.

In between the story of the rich you ruler and Bartimaeus Jesus taught about how if you want to be great in the kingdom of God you must learn to be the servant. Is that not an example of loving your neighbor as yourself? Here this widow, loving God with all she has, stands in contrast to the self-serving, self-promoting scribes.

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."

Jesus summoned his disciples to himself. This was something that he didn't want to pass by their attention. Having summoned them to himself, he said, "I solemnly declare." What comes to mind when you think of a solemn occasion? This was not an incidental observation in which he

thought the disciples would be interested. He spoke solemnly to them. "This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing."

Application

What can we say by way of application? Again, Edwards comments, "For Jesus, the value of the gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver" (Edwards, 381). I think that is an astute and well phrased comment. Typically, when you hear a message on this passage, the point made is that it is the heart that matters. After all the scribes and Pharisees gave to be seen by others. Their gift went KACHING in the offering box, the widow's went *plink plink*. They gave to be seen and recognized. But we should give with a heart of gladness. That is the message we normally hear is it not?

Now I do not intend to criticize that at all. I think that is a faithful interpretation and exposition of this passage. But I think that Edwards comment goes a bit deeper, "the value of the gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver." Here is why his rings so true. We love our money. And probably very few people give lot of money in order to be seen. Because we love our money so much, giving a lot of it just for recognition is not worth it. Also, in our love of money, we content ourselves with small amounts of giving as long as we are doing it with the right heart. In this scenario, we proudly sing the praises of the widow as we also throw in our two pennies. We give a small amount and justify ourselves by saying that we did so joyfully. Now do you see how Edward's comment reveals that abuse? "The value of the gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver."

In Matthew 6:21, Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Our actions betray our heart. In Matthew 15:8 Jesus says, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." We say that we love him and value him because we give with a joyful heart. But in so doing we honor him with our lips when our hearts are far from him. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Do not be guilty of mere lip service. Love God, not just with your lips, but with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.

Tim Keller - Bearing burdens. This fulfills the second greatest commandment.

If a brother reveals a struggle and you say, "I'll pray," and it costs you nothing, that is a cop-out. Praying is good just like giving with a joyful heart is good. But just as giving two pennies with a joyful heart is a cop-out for giving sacrificially, so also saying, "I'll pray about it" is an excuse for inactivity.

You may say, "Preacher, you don't understand; our budget is tight. We have bills to pay." I believe it and yet I say you have extra money and time. Living in a lesser home does not even occur to us. Turning off the air conditioning does not even occur to us. Riding a bike to work (for us small towners) does not even occur to us. We have lots of money tied up in lots of things that are nice but that we do not need.