

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

Holy and Acceptable Worship

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Mark 12:38-44

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Mark 12:38; that’s on page 849 in your pew Bibles. Jesus is in Jerusalem during the last week of his life before the cross. He has been faced with continual opposition from the collective force of the leaders in Jerusalem to discredit his authority he claimed to have as he rode into town on Palm Sunday. He counters their attacks in such a way that in vs. 34 we read, “And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.” (Mark 12:34).

But during his last encounter that we looked at last week, Jesus affirmed that the sum and substance of the law is to love God and love your neighbour. And Jesus goes on to say that the scribe was wise when he said that to do this “is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mark 12:33). By saying this he is inferring that there is a priority in what God desires in worship. Love is more significant than sacrifice.

And if we desire to worship God in a way that is most pleasing to him then it would be wise for us to know what is most important. Thankfully, Jesus not only tells us that the way we worship matters, but he also shows us. In our passage this morning Jesus points to both a model to be feared and a model to be followed.

Hear now the Word of the Lord starting in vs. 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 and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” 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. 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. 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.”

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Jesus warns us about worship that incurs condemnation and commends worship that pleases God. He does this by contrasting the pride and greed of the Scribes/wealthy with the humility and generosity of a widow. With these two vivid pictures set side-by-side, we can see what really matters when we bring what we have before God in worship.

So, this morning, let's consider:

What Matters When We Worship?

First, when we look at these two examples, we see that what really matters when we worship is,

1. The attitude of our heart

On the one hand you have the scribes. Because the Jews still viewed themselves as being a theocratic kingdom, the scribes functioned as religious, civil, and social leaders. For instance, not only did the scribes have authority when it came to the teaching of the Law, but they also had influence in how it was legally applied. So, they acted as a lawyer, celebrity, politician, and pastor all mixed into one.

And when the Jews saw a scribe it was made clear they were worthy of honor. They could be easily identified by their dress. In fact, Jesus specifically mentions these robes which were ornate and ended with tassels at the bottom which touched the ground. The higher up the ladder they

were, the more lavish the robes and larger the tassels. The people saw this and recognized them as pious. They stood with a reverent greeting as the scribes passed through the marketplace, calling them “Father” and “Rabbi”. They placed them at the best seat in the synagogue and at feasts.

The problem was not their leadership. These were the ones that God called to be the spiritual leaders of the people. They were supposed to teach God’s Word, guide them in truth, and protect them from harm. The problem was that they were imposters and Jesus saw them for what they really were in the eyes of God. There was no fear of the Lord in their heart. They were swindlers who exploited their power to rob widows and whoever they could to move up the ladder. There was no passion for the house of the Lord. They were frauds who craved the praise of the people and the places of power.

Jesus saw past their fancy clothes, their repetitious prayers, and their fancy rhetoric. He knew their heart and sternly warned against them. Jesus may not sound harsh in the passage in front of us. But if we look at the parallel passage in Matthew, we get an extended record of what Jesus said during this part of his teaching. Jesus said,

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:27-28).

He spends 36 verses in this chapter condemning the scribes and Pharisees. He identifies their injustice and calls them blind guides, fools, dirty dishes, and a brood of vipers. He sees that their hearts are wicked and they are deceiving people into following them to hell.

So why did the Jews follow these imposters? Because they assumed that the outward piety that they saw was acceptable to God. In their mind, it was sacrifices, prayers, position, money, and authority that pleased God. But this is not the case. God looks at the inward parts of man.

We can see this in the anointing of David. When Samuel was told to anoint one of Jesse’s sons as king, he looked at Eliab and assumed by his outer appearance he was the one. Then we read, “But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7).

God is not superficial. He plumbs the depths of the heart – to motive, affection, and holiness.

Jesus warns the crowd that someone can look good but be utterly evil. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 was a clear example that even if you conform to the letter of the law, you are still far in your heart from what God demands. The scribes could not hide under a man-made veneer of virtue. Nothing can be hidden from him and God will condemn those who come exalting themselves yet full of unrighteousness.

But Jesus knew what is pleasing to God. He was the Lord of David who said, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Psalm 51:17) The people were looking to the wrong thing and Jesus, perceiving the heart of the widow, commended her. In his ear, the heartbeat of her pure devotion resonated far louder than the clamor of many coins.

So in this we see another thing that matters in our worship:

2. The purity of our motives

After warning the crowd about the scribes, he beckons the disciples to point out a widow. In vs. 43, Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box” (Mark 12:43). Many rich people gave large sums but the poor widow gave more! Either Jesus was not good at counting or there is something different about how he defines “more”. How could he render her two coins as having significant value?

In vs. 44, we get the answer. The rich gave *out of their abundance* or their overflow. These were large sums, but it was what could be easily parted with. They would still have enough to live self-sufficiently. For instance, it’s like them having 125% of what they needed and gave the 25% off the top to the Lord. The widow, on the other hand, gave from the very little that she had. It was what she had to survive. This is like her having 25% of what she needed and gave 100% of that to the Lord. The amount of money that the poor widow gave may have small but the proportion was higher.

So, Jesus is saying that proportion rather than amount is of greater value. But if we whip out our wallets, without thinking, to give 100% of our money and live under a bridge then I think we’ve missed the point. The widow didn’t give 100% because she was trying to meet a requirement of the law. The proportion was an indication of the extent of her faith. She had an undivided zeal for

the Lord's house.

The widow demonstrated pure devotion, unwilling to keep any for herself or another. She did what was right in the eyes of the Lord with a whole heart. Her whole focus was on pleasing the Lord because she knew that if he desired God that could give her so much more than she had given.

If you remember, Amaziah had to be reminded this truth. In 2 Chronicles 25, Amaziah was king of Judah. It says, "And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, yet not with a whole heart." (2 Chron. 25:2). And we get an immediate picture of what this means. He amasses an army of 300,000 of his own men and then hires 100,000 men from Israel to go to war. Then a man of God tells him that the Lord is not with Israel so if he takes the 100,000 he will be surely defeated. If he doesn't take the 100,000 then they will be helped by God. He is promised success with God or destruction if he wants to do it his own way. And he responds to the man of God and says, "But what shall we do about the hundred talents that I have given to the army of Israel?" (2 Chron. 25:9b). He was promised victory but was leery because he already paid the soldiers! So the man of God reminded him, "The Lord is able to give you much more than this." (2 Chron. 25:9b). The widow knew what this man of God told Amaziah and was willing to put it all in.

The rich wanted to tack the kingdom of God onto their lives as if it were an accessory. The widow's money reflected where her heart, her trust, and her hope resided. The widow gave everything because she saw the kingdom of God as infinitely valuable. She was like the man and the merchant in Matthew 13 where it says,

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:44-46).

The widow was a picture of the one who knew the value of the kingdom of heaven. And becoming poor, she become rich.

We then see that what also matters in our worship is:

3. The care of our neighbor

The worship of the scribes was distasteful to Jesus because it did not cause them to treat the poor with kindness and dignity. On the contrary, it involved the abuse of the poor. This may seem

subtle but I do not think it is an accident that in vs. 40, Jesus says the scribes are those “who devour widows' houses” and then he points out a widow.

As I mentioned before, the scribes were not only religious leaders but they were also involved in other areas of civil and social life. The scribes would often leverage their power in these areas in order to gain from easy prey. They would cheat them out of their estate after promising legal protection. Socially they would abuse their hospitality by staying excessively in their homes and eating all their food. And when they were old and unable to reason, they would convince them that she owed them the house for their legal services.

This is exactly the opposite of what they should have been doing! They were supposed to be caring for these widows.

Not only do we see God’s righteous displeasure of this kind of injustice here, but we see it back in the Old Testament as well. Being a priest and having observed the other religious leaders of Israel, God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel saying,

“The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.” (Ezekiel 34:1-4)

The priests looked like they were God’s servants, but they left His people starving, naked, lame, and dying.

And because of this, we read in verse 10,

“Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.”

If you want to be against God then mess with his sheep.

And it wasn’t just the shepherds that God had to rebuke because of their treatment of his people. In Amos 5, God reveals that all of their worship, sacrifices, and gifts were tainted with the sin of injustice and he would reject them. In verse 11, we read that part of their problem is exactly what the scribes are doing to the widow:

”Therefore, because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have build houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.”

But there is something more devastating than not being able to live in their built home or enjoy the harvest of their vineyard. Near the end of the chapter in vs. 21 we read,

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them;

and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24).

There is a connection between the treatment of God’s people and acceptable worship. Beware of this! If you try to worship God at the expense of loving others then your offering will condemn you.

This text does not seem to be overly complicated. It is one of those that is easy to read but hard to apply. So how might the Holy Spirit, through this text, be prodding us to respond?

Response:

1. Beware of false shepherds

And there are always leaders, even religious ones like the scribes and Pharisees, that will seek to lure you into thinking that you can serve money, position, power, and comfort as long as you give a little to God when you get a little extra. Or they will con you like the scribes to fill their pockets in exchange for empty promises. But that is deceit and they are blind leaders that will lead you into ruin and damnation.

Jesus tells us how to do this. He says in Matthew 7:15-20, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

And we know through the thrust of this passage that the fruits that we should be evaluating are not external. They are the internal evidence of spiritual renewal and growth – the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit. The fruits that we should be looking for are the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control.

So keep your guard up. There is a gravity to charisma, wealth, health, popularity, and all the things of this world. The remains of our flesh will desire to follow suite and even convince ourselves that these are worth following and imitating. See it for the abomination to God that it is and seek to follow those that display worship that is noble, good, and eternal.

2. Check your heart

If the condition of our heart matters when we worship – if God will reject our half-hearted and tainted worship – then we ought to prepare our heart beforehand.

This means that we first need to evaluate the condition of your heart before we begin. One way you can check your heart is by auditing your behaviour because according to Jesus those things flow out of the heart.

So we can ask ourselves things like: “Where is your treasure going? How is your attitude toward the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable? Are you living lavishly or simply? What do you talk about?”

Our actions can give us a general indication but sometimes we can do right things with the wrong inclination. Jonathan Edwards, a prominent puritan, wrote *Religious Affections* where he asserted that a person has two faculties: a) understanding; and b) inclination or will. When he speaks of affections, he speaks of the second. He puts forward twelve true signs which distinguish the truly gracious and holy affections as part of true religion. I highly recommend you grabbing a copy and going through them all as a helpful rubric. But let me read a few that show you how you assess your inclination when you worship.

“Primarily founded on the loveliness of the moral excellency of divine thing; a love to divine things for the beauty and sweetness of their moral excellency is the first beginning and spring of all holy affections.” (253-65) “

“Tend to, and are attended with, the lamblike, dovelike spirit and temper of Jesus Christ; they naturally beget and promote such a spirit of love, meekness, quietness, forgiveness, and mercy, as appeared in Christ.” (344-356)

“The higher gracious affections are raised, the more is a spiritual appetite and longing of soul after spiritual attainments increased.” (376-82)

The widow knew experientially what Jesus meant when Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (Luke 6:20). She did not try to act more important than she was, make it look like she was contributing more than she was, or hide who she was. It was plain to all that she was a poor widow who had little to offer in comparison. But she knew that is exactly where God wanted her. That is what made her heart long for the living God who she believed with all her heart was her provider, sustainer, and saviour.

How many of us evaluate our value and contributions to the Lord based on our social status, jobs, paycheck, health, or our family dynamic? We adopt this from the world and we try to bring that in here. NONE of these things add value to us. NONE of these make our contributions to the Lord more respected. God sees the heart. Whether you are a doctor, mechanic, airline pilot, or toilet scrubber, your humble devotion before him is what matters. If it is divided in devotion or sinful injustice resides then until you do business with the Lord, your worship is a stench.

3. Give like you believe

The widow could have saved one of the two mites for herself. She still would have been giving 50% which is a lot more than many of us give today. But she doesn't do that, she gives it all. In doing so she displayed the sacrificial cost of discipleship. All throughout his ministry, Jesus has been telling people what it will cost them to follow him. He says clearly, “So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:33).

Those that claim that they are followers of Jesus will give in a way that is different from the world. Jesus has paid the ultimate price, laying everything down, for their salvation. How can those who claim to follow this kind of savior refuse to part with their possessions to be with him? I don't think this passage is all about giving money, but I do think it clearly applies to how we give. When we see our true lowliness before God, the treasures purchased for us in heaven, and the opportunities to be part of God's redemptive plan for others, it will profoundly impact how we give.

With Christ as our Lord, we are not bound by possessions as our master. We have a new master and we cannot serve both. Jesus told his disciples.

“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one

and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Luke 16:13).

It is not that money is inherently evil. Having little or much is not the issue. The Apostle Paul said that he knew both abundance and need (Philippians 4:12). The issue is who acts as the master. Do we serve the money or does the money serve us as we serve our Lord, Jesus Christ?

Naturally, if we are followers of Christ, we will have new preferences, priorities, and affections. We will not be able to continue living in this world as if we have not been bought with a price for another one. And if the Scripture is true that “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21) then this will result in new purchases. Our bank accounts will be leveraged to the glory of God.

Conclusion:

Through a poor, widow woman he gives us a picture of true worshipful devotion to God that is unknown by a world who prizes self-righteous leaders.

She knew the mercies of God time and time again as she was used by others to exalt themselves and then discarded. But even though she was part of a cruel religious system that crushed her rather than cared for her, she gave all she had. She gave, believing that God was worth it all.

And this was before the Cross! How much more should we give all we have, believing that God is worth it all?

Paul says in Romans 12:1, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

By the mercies of God – displayed vividly on the cross – We take all that we have – our possessions, our lives, our future – and we lay them down as a fragrant offering before him to do with as he pleases. And one day, although poor, marginalized, and worthless to this world, our Savior will exalt us to rule at his right hand and give us the glorious inheritance that he has stored for us.

Pride and greed threaten to hinder our worship. Let us be wary of letting it creep into our leadership, our fellowship, or our assembling together. God rejoices in the pure, all-trusting sacrifice. Let us humbly lay all things at the throne before the authority of Christ who rules over all and to whom all things are due.

Let's pray together.