

Committed to One God

Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 12 (part II)

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois – February 21, 2016

Mark 12:28-44 NIV

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, "Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?" The large crowd listened to him with delight.

As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."

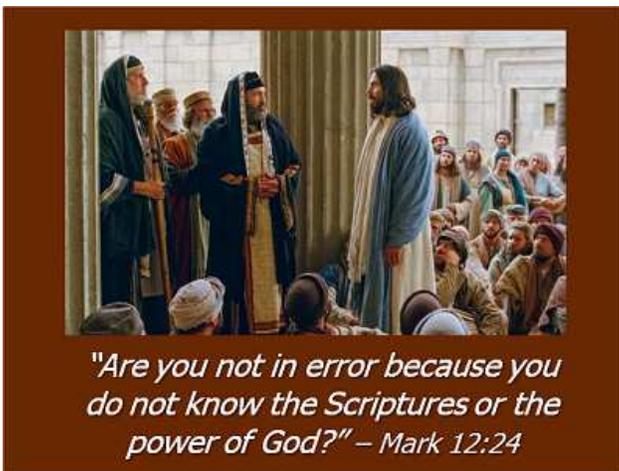
Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything — all she had to live on."



When we left Mark's Gospel story two week ago, Jesus had just had a discussion with the Sadducees about the resurrection. Those Jerusalem priests, as we saw, didn't believe in resurrection. They gave Jesus a bogus

story about seven brothers, each of whom died after marrying, in turn, the same woman. "So whose wife would she be in the resurrection?" they asked — hoping Jesus would give some weird or complicated answer that would demonstrate that the idea of resurrection isn't believable. Jesus, of course, simply pointed out that their question is irrelevant, since in the resurrection people don't get married anyway. But the clincher was Jesus' retort to the Sadducees: "You know neither the Scriptures, nor the power of God." Therefore, he says, when you deny the resurrection, you're sadly mistaken.

We left off our discussion with the reminder that as people loyal to the Lord and in agreement with him, *what the Bible tells us, and what it says God is able to do* are two things upon which we can't compromise. If we have any



reservations about whether the Scriptures are *really our authority*, or whether God *has the power* to raise the dead and do other things that benefit his people, we've stepped outside the realm of Christian belief.

We pick up Mark's narrative at this point with the rest of chapter 12. To begin with, someone who's been listening in on the conversation pipes up with another question. Mark calls this man a "teacher of the law," an expert in the Law of Moses. Often in the Gospels we read about the Pharisees and their scribes. The Pharisees were interpreters of the Law, or Torah, but they couldn't carry around those big scrolls with the five books of Moses. Instead they were accompanied by a scribe, who knew the law by heart. If the Pharisee needed to find a passage in the Torah, the scribe could recite it to him. That's not so far-fetched as it seems to us. At least in the most orthodox circles, rabbis today are expected to know the Torah from memory (and my major professor in graduate school said he once had a Jewish student who had memorized the entire Hebrew Bible — the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings). The scribe was like that; he was a walking iPod or smartphone who could call up from memory any portion of the Law that people needed to discuss. Maybe this "teacher of the law" Mark is introducing here was someone like that.

So the teacher, who's been listening to Jesus' discussion with the Sadducees, asks him a key question: "Which commandment in the Law is the most important?" We all know Jesus' answer, because we've heard it quite often:

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

We could teach all day on this one statement, because in answering the teacher's question Jesus has gone to the very heart of biblical faith: loyalty and commitment to the one God. This is the creed of every worshiper of the Lord, found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." It's called the *Shema* from its opening word: *shema' yisrael, 'adonai 'eloheinu' 'adonai 'echad*. It's the fundamental obligation of every believer who is in covenant with God: to love the Lord with everything we have, and to love him only. *shema' yisrael, 'adonai 'eloheinu' 'adonai 'echad*. It could also be translated this way: "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

In a world of competing religions and multiple claims about gods, the oneness of God is a truth we, as Christians, will never compromise, no matter how tempted we may be by the siren call of diversity. In writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul puts it like this:

We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1 Corinthians 8:4-6).

In this remarkable statement Paul is writing Jesus into the *Shema*! God is one, but our loyalty to the one God is through the one Lord, Jesus the Messiah, in whose resurrection from the dead we see God at work, inaugurating the renewed creation that has been his goal along — so that, as Paul says, "If anyone is in the Messiah, they are in the new creation; the old has passed away, and look! The new is here" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

With the encroachment of Islam into Western civilization — and with the President just having delivered a speech in a mosque — people are asking whether the God Christians worship and the god Muslims worship are the same. It's a silly question, because God, by definition, is One. There can't be *multiple gods* responsible for *one universe*. The issue isn't whether people of other religions are worshiping the same god; the issue is whether people are worshiping the one God *the way he wants to be worshiped*. The temptation isn't usually the worship of false gods, but *the false worship of the one God*. As followers of Jesus we understand that there isn't any other way to the one God except the way through Jesus. But even Christians can be tempted to



practice false worship, thinking we're serving the Lord the way he expects when, in reality, he's looking for something quite different from those he has called into his family.



"The second commandment is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Jesus, in fact, touches on this very point in what he says next, responding to this questioning teacher. Every Jew knew the *Shema* — The Lord is one, and give everything you've got to serving him alone. But Jesus pairs the *Shema* with another quotation from the Law of Moses, Leviticus 19:18: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." In another place, Jesus says the commandment to love our neighbor is just like the commandment to love God; it is its equivalent, on the human scene. Our commitment to the one God means our commitment to live for the benefit of other people.

More specifically, our commitment to the Lord means our commitment to those united with him *in the same agreement or covenant* — or as Leviticus says, those who

are "among your people." Above all we're to seek the welfare of our partners in the body of Christ, and to bless them as a manifestation of our love for the Lord. We're commanded to love our "neighbor," but when we read the "fine print" in the New Testament we understand that our closest neighbors are our fellow Christians. As Paul urges in his letter to the Galatians, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, *especially* to those who belong to the family of believers" Galatians 6:10).

Before we leave this incident, let's call attention to a striking feature in Mark's narrative. Usually, in the Gospels, we find Jesus teaching authoritatively, answering the questions of his disciples, and quashing the arguments of those who oppose him. Rarely do Jesus' questioners get to say anything he commends them for. True, Jesus commends other people he finds doing something that shows they understand his mission. When Zacchaeus the publican repents of his greed and says he'll give half his goods to the poor, or when a woman pours expensive ointment on Jesus' head, Jesus' response indicates he approves what they've done. But it's not often that he commends someone for *how they answer him* in a conversation. And it's not often that the Gospels record the positive feedback Jesus gets from the people he's conversing with.

But note what this unnamed "teacher of the law" says to Jesus after he answers his question about the first commandment in the Law: "Well said, teacher, you are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." And then notice Jesus' response to this teacher: "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:32-34).

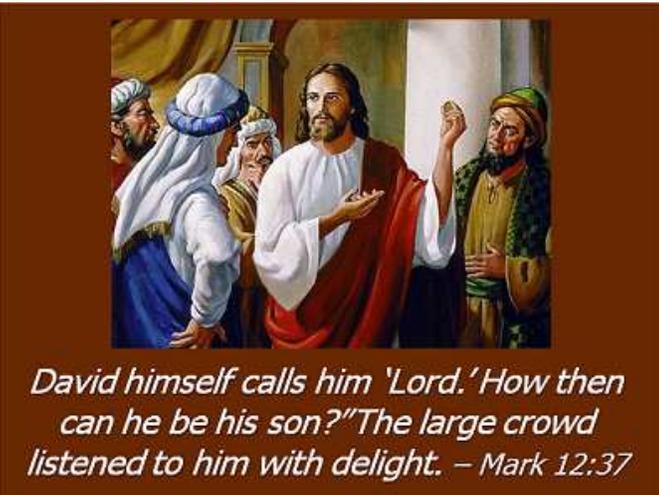
Wouldn't we like to hear Jesus tell us something like that? — "You've said something that's true, something that's important, something that shows you really understand what God is up to." We'd all like to hear Jesus tell us, "You've hit the nail on the head; what you just said shows that you're in sync with God's purpose in bringing about his kingdom." There's a great way to know that Jesus approves what we're saying to him, or what we're saying about him. That's to make sure *our* words line up with *his* words. That's what this teacher of the law did; he basically repeated what Jesus said, and told him, "You're right about that!" If what we say reflects any doubt about the reality of the one God and his purposes for us, or any reservations about whether the way of life Jesus is teaching really works, then we can't expect Jesus to respond positively and commend us as he did this anonymous teacher. We need to watch carefully what we say, for it's our *mouth* that builds the highway that we tread on through life. As Jesus



"You are not far from the kingdom of God" — Mark 12:34

said on another occasion, "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37).

Let's go on, now to the second incident in our reading for today, in which Jesus puts a question to the Jerusalem "experts." "If David, in the Psalms, calls the Messiah 'my Lord,' then how can the Messiah be the *son* of David?" It's a logical question, and one that, at first glance, seems puzzling. Christian teaching has always held that Jesus, the Messiah, is the son of David — as a familiar hymn says, "great David's greater Son." To turn to just one New Testament passage, the apostle Paul opens his letter to the Romans by referring to "the gospel of God . . . the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh" (Romans 1:1, 3). So at first glance it looks like Jesus is contradicting the Jerusalem teachers' claim that the Messiah is the son of David.



Well, he's not contradicting them; he's just saying they aren't going far enough. Yes, the Messiah is, as Paul says, "the son (or descendant) of David according to the flesh," and both Matthew and Luke are careful to trace Jesus' ancestry back through David, Israel's great king. But the Messiah is also the *Son of God*, the one through whom God will fulfill his purpose of bringing not only Israel, but all humanity, back to himself. And that's the role the New Testament writers see Jesus as fulfilling. As Paul writes, in Jesus the Messiah "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). So Jesus quotes from Psalm 110, one of the most frequently quoted Hebrew Scriptures in the New Testament. It's a Psalm of David, where the speaker (either David himself, or a court prophet speaking for him) declares, "The LORD

[that is, *Yahveh*, the name of God] says to *my lord*: [that is, the lord of David the speaker], 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" (Psalm 110:1). The Messiah is the Son of David, but that's only half the story; he's also the Son of God, and therefore David's Lord as well.

Jesus is pushing the Jerusalem teachers to go deeper into the Scripture to see what it really means. That's something you and I need to be careful about, too. It's a temptation to treat the Bible superficially, trotting out a verse here and there to back up some preconceived idea of our own. We always need to look at the larger picture, and understand where a passage of Scripture fits into God's purpose and plan from Genesis all the way through to the Revelation. Where does any verse of Scripture fit in the scheme between God's creation of a good world at the beginning and his restoration of that good world at the end? If we interpret any section of the Bible in a way that stops short of that perspective, then very likely we've misinterpreted it.

So I think Jesus is teasing these religious "experts" — and the people love it, because they're not too thrilled about the way the religious authorities look down on them. As Jesus points out, these "experts" like to be recognized when they go about in public; they expect to get the best seats in the synagogues and at special events; meanwhile, they're only too glad to benefit from the offerings of poor people like widows, and they like to make elaborate prayers so people will hear and admire them, but they're only doing it for show. So ordinary people, the "Joe Lunchbuckets" of the day, are delighted to hear Jesus standing up to these phonies.

By the way, it's sometimes said that the same crowds that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday turned on him by Good Friday and called for him to be crucified. That's not true. We're talking about two different groups of people. The plain, down-to-earth, Jewish people of Galilee and Judea were excited about Jesus' message of the kingdom of God, in spite of what the "experts" thought about him. And isn't it so often the case that the "experts" and the elite turn out to be mistaken, while ordinary people with just common sense get it right? They were right about Jesus, and we see the proof of that when, on the Day of Pentecost, 3,000 people in Jerusalem were baptized, and the Book of Acts also notes that many of the Temple priests also joined the Christian community.

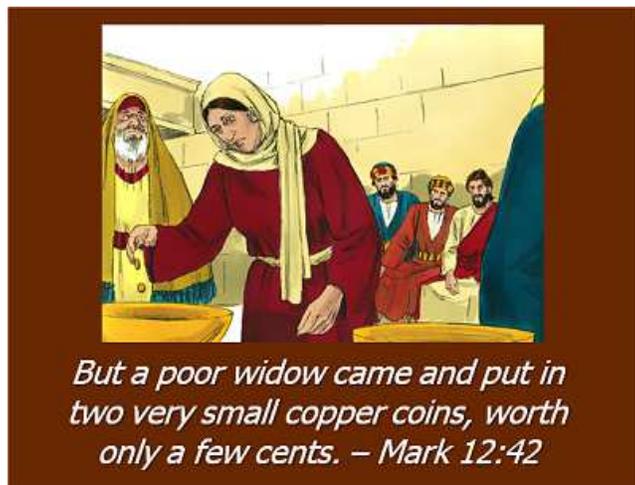
Let's proceed to the third incident in this reading from Mark 12. In concluding the previous discussion, Jesus has declared that the religious authorities of Jerusalem "devour widows' houses." How they were doing this is uncertain, but let's recall that a woman in that culture wasn't normally involved in managing property, and couldn't just go out and earn money for herself, and had no government survivor benefits. If a woman's

husband died, and especially if she had no sons locally who could advise her, she was vulnerable to someone else who might step in and offer to take care of her finances — and, usually, her house was about the only thing her husband had left her. Naturally, a devout widow would assume she could trust someone known to be a religious man, an authority in the Law of Moses. Unhappily, sometimes these “advisers” used their influence to get control of the widow’s property for their own use. (And, sadly, the same thing sometimes occurs today.)

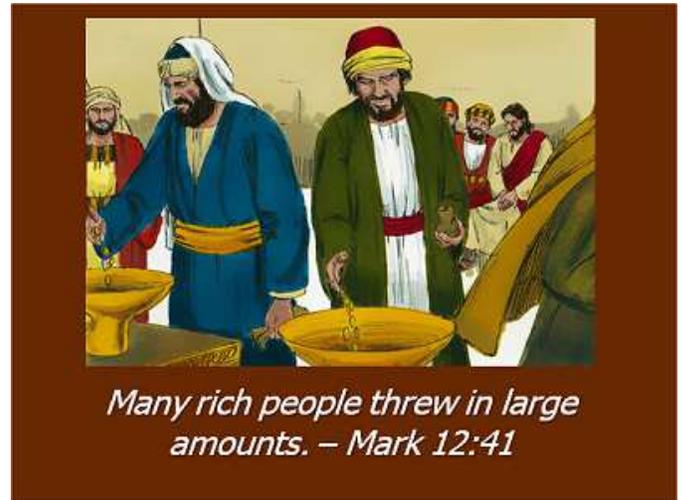
So, typically, a widow had a limited income. We meet such a woman in the incident Mark relates next. Jesus is watching as worshipers enter the Temple courts and place their contributions in the offering boxes, which were partly for the relief of the poor. There was no electronic payment method here, like PayPal or a debit card, and people didn’t write checks, and they didn’t have paper money. So what they had to contribute was in the form of coins, and it was pretty easy to see how much each worshiper put into the box. In our method of collecting offerings, only the financial secretary knows how much each person or family contributes. It wasn’t like that in the ancient world.

Some wealthy people were, indeed, generous, and we meet some of these benevolent rich people in the Gospels like Zacchaeus the publican (after he met Jesus), or Joseph of Arimathea who offered his family tomb for Jesus’ burial, or Joanna whose husband was one of Herod’s officials and who helped to provide for the needs of Jesus and his disciples. Not everyone Jesus met was poor; he dealt with rich people, too, and from indications in the Gospels I believe Jesus himself was fairly well off — but that’s another story.

At any rate, as Jesus looks on some of the wealthier worshipers are contributing substantial amounts to the Temple treasury. But then here comes this widow, and all she has to give are two very small coins. Why was Jesus impressed with her tiny contribution? He explains to his disciples: All these rich people gave only part of their wealth, but this poor widow, who only put in two small coins, gave *everything she had*. Therefore, says Jesus, she gave more than those who gave much larger amounts.



As we leave Mark’s chapter 12, then, we leave asking ourselves this question: How does my financial support for the work of God, through this church or whichever ministry we contribute to, reflect my level of commitment to what God is doing? Am I fully on board with what how God is working to bring people to himself in worship, in amendment of life, and in deliverance from whatever is holding them back from the life the Lord wants to give them? That’s a question each of us has to ask for ourselves, but let’s ask it honestly and then act on the answer we come up with.



What’s Jesus talking about here? Is he really talking about money, as if it’s okay for you and me to just put our two cents’ worth into the offering plate? I don’t think so. I think Jesus is looking at people’s commitment to the purposes of God, and how much they trust the Lord to provide for their needs. This widow is fully committed; she has given *everything*, because she loves the Lord and is willing to be totally dependent on him to take care of her needs. Her behavior seems reckless to us; shouldn’t she be more prudent in managing her limited resources? Jesus doesn’t seem to think so. He commends this poor widow for the faith that led her to give her all.