

trumpet-like containers being placed in the outer 'Courtyard of Women and Gentiles' (where Jesus was), for the purpose of collecting the money needed to pay for the immense project of building the Temple, begun in the days of Herod the Great, but still not paid for in Jesus' day. If this was the case and this was the reason for people giving money into the 'offertory boxes', then the gift given by the widow seems all the more extraordinary. What was her tiny offering in comparison to the vast amounts of money required for the building of the Great Temple?

I mention this because it is just possible that if this was the scenario, then Jesus would have known it, and pointed her out as a perfect example of the complete self sacrifice needed to build a new Temple; the one He would build, the Church of God (see Ephesians 2:21). The coins placed in the offertory by the woman were two small 'quadrans', Roman coins which equate with the lowest denomination of coin in circulation at any time, maybe a penny in the UK or a cent in the US. What is interesting is that these were Roman coins; perhaps, in Jesus' mind they signified the Gentile contribution to the New Temple of the Church, as they would almost certainly not have been acceptable as an offering in the Jewish Temple!

Application

It is hard for us to read Jesus' story about the widow because we do not feel that the story tells us everything we want to know, in particular, how God did actually care for this woman once she had surrendered all to Him. Her gift was commended by Jesus, but the rich people who gave out of their plenty probably continued to live the life of the rich; it seems unjust. This, however, is the perennial problem we face with expressing and explaining our faith. If the widow could gain some sort of guarantee of help as a consequence of giving her gift, then Jesus' point would count for nothing. Faith is faith precisely because it is trust in God under the most impossible of circumstances, and we have to trust that God looked after this widow in some way. Likewise, we are called to give our all to the Lord and trust Him for what happens to us, for that is how faith works and that is why the poor widow is an example of such faith.

It is fascinating to see that Jesus spoke so strongly against the scribes who had an inadequate view of the Messiah (12:35f.) or who paraded their learning in an unworthy manner (12:38f.) just after He had concluded a helpful and creative discussion with a scribe (12:28-34). It is a reminder that in all walks of life there are some people who are good and some who are not so good at what they do. A scribe was one who embraced learning, and throughout history, some have done this for good, and some for ill; as a notable professor once said to me a number of years ago; 'a rogue is a danger to himself and a few others, but a rogue with a PhD is a danger to society!' Jesus, however, draws out the difference between the two, as He brings out the best from those who are prepared to trust Him, and identifies the flaws and weaknesses of those who do not, as in Mark 12. The same is true for us who are not scholars but have other gifts and graces. The Lord is our judge and He is the One in whom we must trust if we are to find fulfilment in our work and approval from the Lord for what we do, whatever it is.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what you believe it means to call Jesus the 'Messiah'. Is this a helpful word to use today?
2. In what ways do religious people parade their faith in inappropriate ways today? What can be done about this?
3. Try to think of a similar situation today which makes the same point as the story of the 'widows mite'.

Discipleship

In this passage of Scripture, Jesus had freedom to draw from what He saw in the Temple and teach those who gathered around Him. His opponents had all been silenced and yet His time was short; it was only days before His death. As you continue with the Lent discipleship challenge to write down what you think Jesus may have thought, remember the importance of Jesus' clear knowledge of who He was and what He had come to do.

Final Prayer

I am never aware of You more fully, Lord God, than when my heart sings Your praise, my mouth speaks of Your glory, and I do all I can to demonstrate Your love in this world. Liberate me by the power of Your Holy Spirit to worship You from my heart through everything I do. All glory be to You, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, I offer You the prayers of my soul which do not ever cease; the prayer which offers You the love and praise of my whole being, the prayer which asks You to be by my side at all times and in all places, the prayer which seeks Your help to remain lovingly faithful to those You have placed by my side, and the prayer which seeks the strength and guidance of Your Holy Spirit at all times. Lord Jesus Christ; these are my constant prayers, and I know that You answer them. Praise You! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Forgiveness

Pray for people who you know who have been rejected by the church when they have offered themselves for some kind of work or ministry. The sense of rejection can be very deep, and it can be hard for them to find a path of forgiveness which will enable them to move on and find God's purposes for them. Pray that such people might be upheld by the grace of God.

Meditation

Give me a heart to follow where You lead, O Lord;
Remove my desire to wander from Your path
Or follow where the world would lead:
For I would be Your disciple.

Give me a heart to always speak the truth, O Lord;
Remove my desire to manipulate the facts
Or try to make the things I say sound good:
For I would speak Your Word.

Give me a heart to show faithful love, O Lord;
Remove my desire to keep my love private
Or use it with prejudice for those I favour:
For I would be Your servant.

Give me a heart to love good and hate evil, O Lord;
Remove my desire to avoid tough decisions
Or to fail to discern what is of You, and what is not:
For I would fight for Your Kingdom.

Bible Study - Mark 12:35-44

³⁵ While Jesus was teaching in the Temple He said, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the Son of David?' ³⁶ For David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said; "The Lord said to my Lord; sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." ³⁷ Now David himself calls Him "Lord", so how can He then be his son?' A large crowd listened to Him with delight!

³⁸ As Jesus taught them, He said; 'Beware of the scribes, who enjoy parading around in flowing robes and being greeted in the market places, ³⁹ having the most important seats in the synagogues and the best places at feasts! ⁴⁰ They exploit the homes of widows and pretend to say long prayers; they will receive a harsher judgement.

⁴¹ Now Jesus sat down adjacent to the treasury and watched how the people put money into the offertory box. Many rich people put in large sums of money, ⁴² and then, a poor widow came and put in two small coins of the smallest value. ⁴³ Jesus called His disciples and said to them, 'Amen, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more into the offertory box than all the other contributors. ⁴⁴ For they gave out of their riches, but she, because of her poverty, has contributed all she has. She put in everything she had to live on.'

Review

Since Jesus began to teach in the Temple, He had been involved in a constant round of disputes with religious leaders; priests, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and elders. One by one, they had come to try and trip Him up with their arguments, and He demolished them all. Finally, after a more engaging discussion with one scribe (12:28-34), Jesus' authority was held in awe by all who met Him, as Mark reports; 'after that, no-one dared to ask Him any more questions' (12:34). Having gained the space to teach what He wanted without fear of interruption, Jesus was at last able to speak and teach as He wanted, and Mark now reports three incidents based around Jesus' teaching. He mocked the scribes' inadequate understanding of the Messiah (12:35-37), He condemned the religious practices of the scribes (12:38-40), and he praised the true religion found in the sacrificial giving of the widow (12:41-44).

Each of these three teaching incidents is fascinating, and each has echoes of Jesus' teaching found elsewhere either in Mark or in the other Gospels. Together, they form a small summary of some of Jesus' important teaching themes, and they are emphasised just before Jesus took the disciples to one side to teach them about the future coming of God's Kingdom (Mark 13). After this, Mark records the long story of Jesus' last two days before His death (Mark 14 onwards).

In the first section, Jesus taunted the scribes (the scholars of his day) about what they thought of the Messiah. He did this by referring to Psalm 110:1, and used it to comment on what they thought about the meaning of the term the 'Son of David'. It is not easy to follow exactly what Jesus was saying here (12:36), but His point was that merely to call the Messiah the 'Son of David' was inadequate. Jesus did not disown the title 'Son of David', but He showed that the Messiah had to be much more than one of David's descendants. Jesus turned the scribes' definition of the Messiah on its head (we will see later how He did this), and when Mark says, 'a large crowd listened to Him with delight' (12:37), the Greek words he used strongly suggest that they had a good laugh at the scribes expense!

In yesterday's reading, we came across a scribe who accepted Jesus' teaching and received His approval (12:34), but he was not typical of most. Jesus had found one worthy scribe, just as in John's Gospel, he found one good and worthy Pharisee, Nicodemus (see John 3). However, this did not change the fact that the majority of scribes had been corrupted by the power and status their position afforded them in Jewish society. Indeed, they took advantage of it, and Jesus alludes to the awful practice of taking advantage of the property (and finances) of widows under the guise of serving them with 'long prayers' (12:40). This was an appalling practice, which history shows was not practiced exclusively by Jewish scribes; such are the dreadful excesses of false religion.

The last of the stories Mark told about Jesus' teaching in the Temple is very well known; it is the widow's 'mite' ('mite' is an old English term for a small amount of money, and people know this word because of its use in the Authorised Version). Jesus saw the wealthy make a show of placing large amounts of money in the receptacles provided for the purpose in the outer courts of the Temple, presumably to the approval of all who were in a position to take notice. The widow gave away the last of her small coins (12:44); it was an extraordinary gift, and one Jesus commended as an example of someone who was prepared to place total trust in God. From that day to this, the widow's offering has been the purest of examples of the sacrificial giving required of a disciple of Jesus.

All of these incidents show us the dangers of false religion based on status and personal ego, and this is the very opposite of the example of the true Messiah, who came to give Himself for others so that they might live.

Going Deeper

Each of these three stories about Jesus' teaching paints a graphic picture of the Israel of Jesus' day and also needs some explanation. What did Jesus mean by His use of Psalm 110:1 (12:36)? What exactly were the scribes doing which so offended Jesus (12:38-40, especially 40)? And how can a widow in utter poverty be regarded as a pure example of Christian discipleship? We will now address these and other questions.

Jesus mocks the scribes' understanding of the Messiah

In Jesus' day it was a standard way of describing the Messiah to say that He was the 'Son of David'. While Jesus did not wish to deny this, it appears that He really objected to the exclusive use of this title for the Messiah. If the Messiah's primary title was the 'Son of David', this would strongly tie Him to the Jewish concept of what the Messiah should be and do. The scribes never considered the Messiah as anything other than a kingly figure whose exclusive interest

was the Jews; He would be their King, of the line of David. However, Jesus' understanding of who He was extended far beyond this; He was the Lord of the whole earth, for example, and in addition, most of Mark's Gospel shows Jesus to be more like the Messiah described by the prophet Isaiah, a 'suffering servant' as described in the famous prophetic 'servant songs' (Isaiah 42-53). There was certainly more to Jesus than this title.

In order to make this point and play games with those who had just tried to make sport of Him with their own trick questions, Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1; 'The Lord said to my Lord; sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.' Now, in its day, before the time of Christ, this Psalm was regarded as a psalm written by David. 'The Lord' referred to at the beginning of the verse was God, and 'my Lord' who comes next in the verse was God's Messiah. It was therefore accepted that this psalm prophesied the military victory of the Messiah over all the enemies of Israel (as we see in the rest of the psalm). When Jesus said; 'David himself calls Him "Lord", so how can He then be his son?' (12:37), He simply posed a conundrum to the scribes. How could the Messiah be called the 'Son of David', that is, someone of his descent and therefore inferior to him, if David himself spoke about the Messiah as someone greater than he? There is no answer to this, beyond accepting Jesus' understanding that the Messiah was in fact far more than a 'Son of David', and the title could not tie Him down. Jesus knew what He was speaking about; He was the Messiah, and He had come to do far more than save the Jews, though He no doubt wanted to fulfil this part of His task.

In this light it is perhaps sad to reflect that Jesus had already come terms with the fact that the people of Israel had rejected their own Messiah, their 'Son of David' (see the cursing of the fig-tree, 11:12-24; and the parable of the vineyard servants, 12:1-12).

Jesus mocks the lifestyle of the scribes

Whilst some scribes were clearly worthy of serious matters of learning and doubtless men of integrity, many were not, and Jesus clearly pilloried their public image which was well established. Men of learning, called scribes, who had studied with the great rabbis of the day, were entitled to wear outer garments which were longer than the normal in Jewish society, and although these were ceremonial and religious rather than functional, the scribes liked to parade their learning by keeping them on. More than this, there was an established convention in Israel that one should address with a formal greeting ('shalom'), anyone you met who had higher learning than you. Now if the scribes had left their long gowns for religious ceremonies alone such formal greetings were restricted to those events. However, by continuing to wear the robes even in the market places (12:38), they forced everyone around them to respect them and greet them, clearly massaging their ego's!

If the scribes' misdemeanours were merely a matter of show, then their arrogance would not be a problem, but something else seems to have been happening. Verse 40 reads like something of an addition to the rest of the teaching in verses 38 and 39, and the words within it are curt and abrupt. There is clearly some connection between the widow's homes, the 'show of long prayers' said by the scribes and the 'harsher judgement' they receive. The implication is that the scribes were benefitting from the social distress common amongst widows in Israel by promising them God's blessing through the 'long prayers' they said in exchange for financial contributions. Israel was not the only society in which the poor have been ripped off.

It is possible that the mention of the problem of poor widows in Israel was consequently on Jesus' mind as He wandered through the Temple watching what was happening, and His eyes were drawn by those gathering to pay their offerings into the Temple treasury.

By contrast, Jesus praises the widow

One of the features of all these three items of teaching from Jesus are that they are not parables or set piece disputes, but wise sayings of Jesus which arose from real life incidents and things that Jesus saw around Him. Although the early church clearly had some influence on which great stories of Jesus were passed down and eventually recorded by the Gospel writers, the feel of these real incidents still comes across very distinctly in teaching stories such as this. I have encountered those who thought that the story of the 'widow's mite' was one of Jesus' parables, but we are reminded very clearly that this famous story comes from an incident in which a real, very poor person, gave everything to God in the Temple.

We do not know the motives of the widow in giving away her final two coins, and Jesus did not seek them out; or if He did, we do not know what the consequence of this was. Neither do we know what the gift was given for, because money was not given in the Temple as an alternative to sacrifice or as an 'offertory' as we might think of in church today. There is a record of thirteen