

# The Rare Jewel of True Religion

Mark 12:38-44

*Halifax & Glenholme: 23 August 2020*

## **Introduction:**

As we have made our way through Mark's gospel, we have certainly seen our Lord encounter a great diversity of persons.

- His reactions to each one were often surprising and even disturbing to His disciples.
- They have often confronted and challenged us (like they did the twelve) to look at things from a different perspective.
  - We have seen Him eating with tax collectors and even taking one to be one of His disciples.
  - We have seen Him resisting and avoiding Gentiles, but then commending them.
  - We have seen Him rejecting those who were regarded as the most pious men in Israel while embracing women and little children, who were often overlooked.

Since His arrival at Jerusalem, we have seen Him encounter Israel's leaders as they have come with questions in an effort to entrap Him or at least stump Him.

- The chief priests, the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, and the scribes have all had their turn with the result that in every engagement His marvellous wisdom and poise have been magnified and His detractors have been humbled.

Today we come to last section in chapter 12 where Jesus again surprised His disciples and forced them to look at things in a new and more godly way.

- Here He denounces the scribes, who were highly regarded spiritual leaders, and He commends a poor widow that nobody would ever have had the least respect for if Jesus had not pointed her out.
- As the Holy Spirit has presented these two accounts next to each other in Mark,
  - we are met with a striking contrast between false religion and true religion—false religion that is highly esteemed by men and true religion that is held in contempt.
  - In Matthew, a whole chapter is devoted to Jesus denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees and the widow is not even mentioned, for there the Holy Spirit through Matthew has detailed the ways of religious hypocrisy;
    - but here in Mark, his denunciation of the scribes is briefly summarised and set in contrast with this godly widow that Jesus praises.

Listen carefully as I read this account to you.

- The Holy Spirit has given us this and all scriptures for our encouragement and edification.
- I will begin in Mark 12:38 and read to the end of the chapter.

**Mark 12:38-44: 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, <sup>39</sup> the best**

seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, <sup>40</sup> who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation." <sup>41</sup> Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many *who were* rich put in much. <sup>42</sup> Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. <sup>43</sup> 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; <sup>44</sup> for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood."

May the Holy Spirit now add His blessing to our engagement with this text, for we cannot understand what He has revealed unless He opens our hearts.

### **I. Here we have a sharp contrast between true religion and false religion.**

A. Even a very cursory look at this passage presents us with this contrast.

1. With the scribes you have religion exploited—used for selfish purposes...
  - And with the widow you have the religious expression of someone who is devoted to God.
2. With the scribes, religion is practiced in an ostentatious way so as to be seen by men—for the honour and reputation it brings to them,
  - but with this widow, religion is done before the Lord. No one would have been impressed with her gift.
  - Some would be today, but that is because we have learned from Jesus that such gifts are impressive.
3. With the scribes, it is for the love of human praise that they do religion; with the widow, it is because of love for the Lord.

B. A couple of historical details will help to fill out the contrast even more.

1. The scribes, it should be understood, were regarded as men that were highly devoted to God.
  - In this way, they were not like the Sadducees, who were wealthy, but not regarded as close to God.
  - The scribes were actually not particularly wealthy.
    - They had small stipends and were dependant on donations.
    - Some of them were befriended by wealthy patrons who gave them generous gifts.
  - The people wore bright clothes, but the scribes stood out in special religious clothing—long robes that were white and that had long tassels on them.
    - They were known to be praying men and were often seen at prayer, rather like Daniel in Babylon.
  - It was expected that when they passed by on the street everyone (with the exception of those who were engaged in labour) should stand to honour them.

- They were treated to special greetings and titles, and they were often invited to dinners and other events where they were given seats of honour.
  - They were also given honorary seats in the synagogue.
  - Many times it was appointed to them, as highly trusted religious men, to look after the estates of widows.
    - Those who abused this trust are said to have devoured widows' houses.
  - It should be understood that Jesus does not condemn all the scribes here... He had just commended one who was not far from the kingdom...
    - But He warns His hearers to beware of the scribes who love to go about in their long robes and who devour widows' houses and whose prayers are a pretense.
    - These were scribes whose religion was all a sham.
- Now let's look at the widow.
2. This poor widow was identified by Jesus as among the poorest of the poor.
- The word translated *poor* is the word that refers to one who was not merely a peasant, but practically a beggar—destitute and unable to provide for herself.
    - Widows of this sort were dependant on the generosity of others.
  - And here Jesus tells us that this widow gave all that she had to live on—which meant that she may have had to go without food that day.
    - The amount she gave was only two mites—two small copper coins which Mark tells his Roman readers were worth a quadrans which was about 1/64<sup>th</sup> of a day's wage—thus a little over a dollar and half.
    - That was all she had for her next meal and she gave it all.
  - I might mention that at the temple treasury, all sorts of gifts were brought.
    - Think of all the things that were needed at the temple...
    - Everything from ingredients for the incense to material to make clothes for the priests. Gold and silver for the vessels, food for the priests and Levites, donations for the support of widows and orphans, salt for offerings... the temple was actually a huge repository.
    - The particular area where Jesus observed the widow was one where there were 13 chests with horns on them where the offerings were placed (inside the horns which emptied into the chests).
      - Often the gift and its amount was announced to a priest who stood by, making it easy to see and hear what people were giving.
  - The two mites of the widow would have been regarded as worthless compared to the great contributions that were being brought by the rich...
    - but Jesus surprises His disciples when (verse 43): **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; 44 for they all put**

**in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood.”**

- Take note that Jesus does not condemn the gifts of the rich—
  - He simply makes it clear that this widow has given more than all of them because she has given all that she had to live on.
  - They contributed, but she sacrificed.

TRANS> So here you have a great contrast between false and true religion.

- Jesus tells us that those like the scribes who exploit religion will be severely punished—
  - At the end of verse 40, He says that they will receive greater condemnation than an ordinary thief because they hid their robbery under a pretense of religion.
- But this widow who gave her livelihood even though her gift would be despised by men, will be rewarded as giving more than all the rich who had contributed that day.

## **II. Jesus tells His disciples (and surely this applies to us) to beware of the scribes who have fallen into false religion.**

A. Surely it is important for us to consider this danger.

1. I do not think Jesus is just telling widows to beware that they do not let these men exploit them...
  - I rather think He is warning all of us to beware lest we follow their example.
    - In fact, I *know* that to be His concern because in Matthew, He says specifically to beware of imitating their bad example.
2. It is very easy, when there is hypocrisy in the church's leaders, to excuse our own hypocrisy.
  - Whole denominations arise that have a great outward show of religion with very little true religion.
  - There are always religious leaders like these who actually despise the very Lord that they claim to serve.
  - They perform their religious rites and pretend that all is well—and they make many disciples who do their bit at the sanctuary and have little regard for the living God and His Son our Saviour.
3. Let me remind you of the lesson that Jesus taught when He was asked about the greatest commandment.
  - a. He taught us plainly that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with our soul and with all our strength, and that the second is like it—to love our neighbour as ourselves.
  - b. In looking at that, I emphasised to you that the very purpose of salvation is to bring us to God—that we might love God and live for God.
    - 1) Too often in our day, salvation is presented to sinners as a way of being forgiven so you can go to heaven.

- It is that, but it is much more than that.
  - The goal is to reconcile us to God from whom we are separated by our sin.
  - The whole point of heaven is that it is a place where instead of serving sin, we love and serve God.
    - True happiness is in knowing the true God and living for Him forever and in loving our neighbour in imitation of God.
- 2) And then there are those false teachers who make religion to consist in rituals.
- Doing religious ceremonies is put in place of loving God.
  - Godliness is replaced with beautiful outward forms—
    - either with a lavish outward display that follows the traditions of men—burning candles and genuflecting at an altar where a priest chants away and waves his hands...
    - Or it is replaced by entertainment, with popular songs performed by a band, multimedia, and interviews with celebrities.
- c. Instead of the means of grace (the preaching of God’s word, the reading of His word, the singing of His word, prayer, and the sacraments in their simple form that Jesus appointed, along with church discipline),
- which are all intended to lead us to see our need of salvation and point us to rest with joy in Jesus Christ,
  - these scribes draw us in to a mere outward form of religion that never truly brings us to a closer walk with God.
- B. It is quite easy to see how false religion can arise in the church.
1. At first, all is well.
    - a. A church of redeemed people arises in a community—a church that truly loves God.
      - They have been reconciled to God by Jesus Christ and they want to live for God.
      - Their chief end is to glorify and enjoy Him.
      - They follow His word, looking to Christ and His Spirit, and they begin to grow in His grace.
    - b. As might be expected, there are those who excel in their service to Him.
      - They are rightly looked to as models and are honoured.
      - This is not wrong. It is right.
        - We are supposed to follow those who follow Christ.
        - We are supposed to give double honour to those elders who serve well in the church.
- But herein is the danger:

2. People arise within the church who delight in the honour that comes to those who serve the Lord instead of in the Lord Himself.
  - a. We very naturally delight in being honoured—in being well thought of.
    - You can see this in everyday life by looking at how much it disturbs people when they are not thought well of.
      - Is it not true that most of your children's quarrels arise when one is accusing another and the accused one is denying any wrong?
      - When you get into a quarrel with your spouse, is it not usually that they have found wrong in you or you in them and it leads to defending yourselves?
      - Why do we have gay pride parades and pro-abortion rallies?
        - Is it not because those who are living immoral lives want everyone to say that what they are doing is good and honourable?
      - Why is there so much virtue signaling?
    - Why do people sometimes seem to compete these days for who has been the greatest victim?
      - Because if you are a victim, you have an excuse for your bad behaviour and you can be thought well of despite your selfishness and laziness.
    - Sometimes people look for honour in nefarious ways.
      - For example, a kid that is having trouble in school will find honour in being a comedian or in being the toughest kid or the coolest kid.
      - Many will sell their chastity and their health in a quest to be cool.
  - b. Because of this desire for honour, people naturally look for ways to obtain it.
    - The best way is by actually being honourable.
      - By seeking what Jesus called the honour that comes from God.
      - It is the honour that comes when, by the grace of Jesus as our Saviour, we begin to love God and to serve Him.
    - But there is a temptation to take short cuts to honour.
      - And when it is seen in a godly church that those who are examples in their devotion to Christ are honoured, it is very easy to do what so many of the scribes had done.
      - You start to put on a show of devotion—with ostentation—going about with a long white robe and receiving greetings—
        - being known for your learning, for your long hours at prayer, or your sacrificial giving—remember Ananias and Sapphira?
        - They saw the honour that godly Barnabas got when he sold property and gave it to the church, so they sold property and pretended that they had given it all to the church.

- Why did they do that? Because they were panting after the honour that Barnabas got when he did it.
- c. When this kind of attitude arises in the leadership of a church, it is not long until it permeates the entire church.
- They become more and more ostentatious because the outward show is much easier to achieve than true godliness.
    - And soon, like the scribes that Jesus is addressing, you have a whole church culture that is mostly a sham.
- C. Do a little soul searching at this point—a little self-examination.
1. Can any of you honestly say that you are free of this vice?
- Let's call it what it is—hypocrisy.
    - Of course hypocrisy is one sin that no one ever admits.
    - The worst kind of hypocrisy is the kind where you pretend to be a believer but are not.
    - I hope that many of you can legitimately deny that kind of hypocrisy.
      - But who among you could say that you have never done religious works or good works with very little regard for the Lord?
      - And how often have you drawn attention to your good deeds because it did not seem good enough that only God should know about them?
    - That is what is admirable about this widow.
      - She did what none who saw her would regard as praiseworthy for no other reason but because she loved the Lord.
      - Another way to ask it is this: how much less good would you do if no one else were to know about it?
  - We might turn it around and look at sins of commission as well.
    - Who among you could say that you have never done before the face of God sin that you would never do in front of your Christian friends?
    - And what about those sinful lusts and desires that you'd be ashamed for anyone else to know about?
      - Why does it not stop you all the more to know that God sees you?
      - And why does it not stir you up to do more good works to know that as Jesus beheld this widow, so He sees you doing your deeds for Him.
2. Of course you must beware of *anti-hypocrisy syndrome* as well.
- Satan is always busy, and he often has great success in deceiving us with anti-hypocrisy syndrome.
  - Anti-hypocrisy syndrome is the sin of those who are so opposed to hypocrisy that they decide that you will never catch them praying long prayers or doing religious works like those hypocrites do!

- No—not them. They won’t be found giving offerings or going to church like their hypocritical neighbours do.
- I told you before about the ladies I met while escaping a rain storm at Point Pleasant Park when I was with a friend.
  - He told them that I was a pastor and these three women told how they quit going to church because there was so much hypocrisy.
  - They proceeded to tell how much better they were after they quit going to church.
    - I told them that they would not like our church at all because we were all sinners who were in great need of God’s mercy and forgiveness and grace.
    - Interestingly, they then began to back off on their boasting about how much better they were after quitting church.
- Yes, you should never pull back from good works or religious duties that God has appointed to avoid showing off.
  - After all, if you do that, you are doing *that* to show off—because you don’t want to appear as a hypocrite.
  - What’s more, you are guaranteed to not please God if you do not do what He commands.

TRANS> So what is the solution to this problem of hypocrisy?

- Jesus says that there is a greater condemnation for those who make a show of their prayers and their religious devotion when it is not real.
  - But what can you do?

### **III. The solution is to do what you do for God.**

- You will say, “Sure—great, but how can I change?”

A. The first thing you need to do is feel the pain.

1. You need to lament that you are not closer to God—that you don’t love Him as you should... that your motives are so often wrong.
2. There is no need to make excuses or to pretend that you are free from this sin.
  - You don’t need do that.
    - You don’t need to self-justify—let Christ justify you.
  - You can’t justify yourself because there is no justification for our failure to live for God.
    - Jesus came to save us because we cannot save ourselves.
    - He is the Son of God, and He is able to save us.
      - As we saw last week, as David’s Son, He is one of us, but He is also David’s Lord, the Son of God from heaven.
      - He’s the only one who has what it takes to save us.



3. And He promises that He will save us if we come to Him.
  - He died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins—on the cross He was punished in our place—He was punished for what we did.
    - You can't pay the penalty of your sin for all eternity, but He, the Son of God, who also became man, paid it in full on the cross.
  - And not only that, but He also promises to bring you to His Father.
    - He promises to give you new life so that you can serve God and live for Him... that is the eternal life that He gives to us when we come to Him to be saved.
    - Like I mentioned before, the purpose of His salvation is to reconcile us to God so that we can live for His glory—God is worthy of all glory and we are in the wrong until we are brought to serve Him in love.
      - So in Christ, you are equipped to serve God sincerely—like this widow did.

B. In Christ, it is for you to build real communion with God through the means of grace.

1. The means of grace are reading the word of God, hearing the word preached, praying, coming to the Lord's table with hunger, singing God's word, living in communion with others who are following Christ, submitting to those He has appointed to watch for your soul...
  - All of these are to be diligently used to build your relationship to God.
  - He has given us these means of grace through Christ because He knows that we need them.
2. These means of grace are not mere rituals the you do to be seen by others.
  - No—they are ways of building up your relationship with God.
    - They are ways He has given you to learn of Him—of His perfection in holiness, of His power and wisdom, of His beauty and grace, of His justice and judgment, of His mercy and grace.
  - They are ways in which you come to understand His works—how He created the world and how He runs the world as a wise and holy God...
    - What He has done to save us in Christ and the depths of His wisdom and love that are displayed through that.
  - It's so sad when people just go to church as their religious bit.
    - They make a show or they go for an uplift instead of to connect with the living God and to grow in their relationship with Him.
    - They say their formal prayers and recite their creeds and sing their songs, but they do not cultivate life with God.
      - He is far away—either viewed as an idol or ignored in the busyness of all their religious activity.
3. Don't you see?

- When you come to Christ you are fully pardoned of all your sins, but you are just beginning your walk with God.
  - He pardoned you and gave you a new heart so that you, who were cut off, could come and walk with God in love.
  - So I am telling you to start walking! Start living for God in the power and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Saviour.

C. Why did this widow give so much?

1. She gave all that she had because she was delighted with God.
  - She had been walking with Him and cultivating her love for Him and her delight in what He had done to save her.
  - She gave all that she had out of a heart of gratitude and love.
2. She was not like the scribe who loved to be seen as a fine religious person by all who came his way.
  - She actually was a fine religious person and found joy in giving all that she had for God.
  - Not there yet?
    - Look to Christ the only Saviour.
    - Pray in His name that you might know and love the Father—and you will.
    - Hear the word, read the word, that you might know and love the Father, and you will.
    - Come to the Lord's Supper that you might feed on Christ crucified for new life in communion with Him and so with the Father.
      - You will experience that communion.

**Conclusion:**

Having heard the word, let's pray for real religion.