

“Putting Everything In”

Mark 12:38-44

March 4, 2007

We start a new stage in our sermon series in the Gospel of Mark today.

To set the scene, Mark has been walking us through the life of Jesus, heading towards the last week of his life in Jerusalem. Jesus began his ministry as a wandering preacher throughout the lands, gaining in popularity and fame. He has demonstrated remarkable power – the power of the Christ, the Messiah. He showed that he was stronger than sickness, evil spirits, nature, and even death. He claimed and demonstrated the authority to declare the forgiveness of sins. He predicted his passion: that is, that he would enter Jerusalem, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, undergo great suffering, be killed and then, after three days, rise again.

There was the parade into Jerusalem. Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem with shouts of praise – all which were signs of the coming of the Messiah. The tension was building. The crisis was mounting. And, in our sermons in recent weeks, we have focused on how Jesus prevailed in each of the successive controversies presented to him – confounding the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees. All of these authorities continued to reject Jesus’ authority even though they experienced the truth he embodied. Jesus answered every question and challenge to the point that – at the end of our passage last week – Mark writes, “After that no one dared to ask him any questions.”

All of which brings us to our text this morning: in this new stage Jesus takes the initiative to teach, comment and critique the Temple. As we get into the text, we should keep in mind that these events are leading to a climax that Jesus already knows, and he is spending his time now on things of the first importance – in other words, the things that matter most.

Mark 12:38-44.

There are two episodes here, and we will take them in order.

1. Beware the Scribes

Jesus teaches the disciples to “beware the scribes.” Jesus is not trying to be particularly nuanced here. He is not trying to calm things down, he is actually pushing things towards a confrontation.

Jesus’ criticism of the scribes is in the political equivalent of inciting a rebellion against the Temple authorities. The scribes were a powerful part of the authority structure. They were the lawyers – called “scribes” because they were responsible for copying the scriptures, knowing the scriptures, and commenting on the scriptures. Jesus targets them because they were supposed to know the Scriptures and the law, and yet had failed to recognize who he was.

Look at the list of Jesus’ criticisms:

- First, “they like to walk around in long robes.” The robes Jesus is describing were used as part of priestly functions in worshiping God. There were (and are) ceremonial uses for robes. Robes signaled holy time, distinct from common time. They were used as a physical symbol of the people presenting themselves before God. They were worn by the priests when engaged in priestly functions; that is, ministering before the LORD. The scribes, on the other hand, had taken to wearing them around the Temple complex in order to be noticed and gain respect for themselves.
- Second, they like to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. The custom here was similar to the system in the military: those of lower rank initiate a salute to those of higher rank. The scribes expected to be greeted by those whom they deemed to be inferior. They sought to be worshiped rather than lead the people in worship.
- Third, and here is where Jesus moves into a more direct attack, “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” This goes directly to their integrity. It seems as if the scribes were acting like the lawyers in the Anna Nicole Smith case – a lot of billable hours and open debate without much substance. Widows consulted the scribes on matters of the law, and the scribes were taking the widows’ money and homes as payment. Then, they would offer long, meaningless prayers in order to help those whom they robbed to feel better.

What is Jesus saying? The scribes were corrupt and the Temple was corrupt. He is charging that the Temple has forgotten God; that it is being operated to benefit those who work in the Temple, that their efforts were designed to protect the growth and power of the Temple. In short, they do not recognize God. If they do not recognize the truth when he comes, they have become corrupt.

Unfortunately, corruption in the church has not gone away. There are two ways it usually happens:

- a. The church becomes so heavenly minded it is no earthly good; and,
- b. The church becomes so earthly minded it is no heavenly good.

The church that is so heavenly minded is one in which it becomes a haven for those fleeing from sinners, rather than the refuge of those fleeing from sin. Seeking purity, the church shuns those who are perceived to be impure. It becomes the job of the church to protect God from sinners, to prevent them from tarnishing what God has done.

The problem in this scenario is that it treats God as being powerless to transform lives or to deal with sin after he has saved us. In other words, we need to shut the doors after we get in because God may not be strong enough to be able to save us *and* others. Jesus’ message and ministry? God is strong enough. “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near; repent and believe the good news.” The gospel – not the church buildings, not the church programs, not the church’s doctrine – is the power of God to salvation.

On the other hand, the church that is so earthly minded acts as though it has to do the work of God for God. The church has to solve poverty, injustice, and any perceived wrongdoing. Prayer is necessary in that it lets God know what we are doing; but there is no expectation God will actually do anything. This kind of church takes on the responsibility of judging what is right. They do not trust God to do that work because God just does not seem to do anything in a timely fashion. Injustice indicates God's absence and it is the church's job to step in on God's behalf.

The problem in this scenario is that it suggests God is absent, neglectful, uncaring, or irresponsible. However, remember Jesus' name, "Emmanuel," reminds us that "God is with us." He is not absent, neglectful, uncaring or irresponsible. God shows how much he cares, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Both of these are corruptions because, ultimately, they treat God as a concept and not as a God who acts. They do not serve the living God who reveals himself in Scripture. Jesus' judgment on the scribes: God is real; beware, they are corrupt.

2. The Widow's Gift

Then, Jesus walked over to the treasury and sat down. He observed what was going on. Imagine a courtyard in which there are thirteen large trumpet-shaped containers used for collecting the financial offering from the people. Some were designated for specific purposes, others were for "free-will" offerings. These offering places were open and public; Jesus takes a position to watch as people approached to present their gifts.

Large crowds had gathered in Jerusalem and lines would have been long to make an offering. People from out of town saved up during the months away in order to make their offering while on their pilgrimage into Jerusalem. Outside historical sources – Josephus, in particular – noted that there was great wealth surrounding the temple. Jerusalem was financially prospering. Many of those who lived and worked in the city were wealthy.

In the midst of the line comes a woman. Jesus identified her as a widow, perhaps by her clothing. She comes and she drops in two coins. Mark uses the Greek word "lepta"; it would take a hundred "lepta" to make a denarius, the equivalent of a day's wage.

Jesus watched, and then called the disciples to attention. His lesson to the disciples was startling: this woman, who was of little account within the Temple system and culture, had given more than those who had given great sums of money.

I need to make one thing clear: Jesus is not condemning those who gave out of their abundance. He is comparing and his is commending the woman, but he is not condemning the other people who gave.

This woman is commended because of her complete trust in the living God. We do not know her name. We do not know her background other than she is a widow. She never speaks. She does not interact with anyone else. She never does anything except put in her two coins.

She holds no security in position, in power, in wealth; she literally has nothing except faith in God. Those charged with the responsibility of taking care of her – those, in fact, with the resources available to them in order to take care of her – have failed her. Despite their faithlessness, she remained faithful.

That trust and hope in God is worth more than any amount of money. As the advertisement goes: making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, so many dollars; making an offering of so much money, so many dollars; trusting and hoping in the living God for your salvation: priceless.

So what do we take from this? Three quick things:

God does not evaluate things with human eyes.

In the eyes of the world, the Temple was a success. Their numbers were up, revenue was good, attendance was stable, they were able to keep up the buildings and make a nice living for those who worked in the system. The Temple was a financial success, it was a religious success, it was a cultural success. On paper, the Temple was a success.

In real life, Jesus spoke the word of judgment: the Temple was a failure. Let me say it again: despite their familiarity with scripture – the Law, the prophets, the writings – they failed to recognize the living God standing in their presence. The indicators perceived as marks of success were actually evidence of corruption.

God values our trust and our faith.

In contrast, the woman is remarkable and commendable *because* her conduct is valued by Jesus. She is remembered and celebrated because Jesus saw and celebrated what she did. Her audience for giving was God, not others. She put her trust in the power of the living God.

On television these days, there is a growing popularity in a poker game called Texas Hold ‘Em. At the beginning of the game, each player has the same number of chips. At any point in the game, the player can put all their chips at risk by betting everything on their hand. It is called “Going all in.” Going all in means that you are putting your game at risk, that you are trusting that you have the best hand and deserve to win.

In whom or what do you trust? If you had to make a decision to “go all in,” – if the situation you faced demanded you to put all of your life, your trust, your resources at risk – on whom or what would you place your trust? Now, if you responded “God” in answer to the time when you *had* to go all in; in whom or what do you place your trust in your day-to-day life?

This was the difference between the woman and all the others who had given out of their abundance. Their gifts were good; hers was better. Hers was a witness of hope in the day-to-day goodness of God.

God does not demand anything he is unwilling to give.

Jesus commends the woman because she gives everything to God and trusts in God for her life. This is exactly the road that Jesus is walking. He has come to Jerusalem to be rejected. He has come to Jerusalem to suffer. He has come to Jerusalem to endure the judgment of sinful man, to bear the cost for sin in his own body, and to die – all while trusting in God for his life.

We come to the communion table today. This is the table that Jesus prepared for his disciples during the week he spent in Jerusalem. We come where Jesus declared to them, “this is my body broken for you; this is my blood shed for the remission of your sins.” In trust and obedience to God, Jesus puts everything in for us.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

God does not demand anything from you he is unwilling to give; in fact, he does not demand anything from you that he has not already given. As we approach the table this morning, I invite you to spend a few moments to reflect on your own life; have you withheld your heart from God? Have you withheld your trust from God? Have you withheld your hope from God? If you can answer any of those “yes,” I invite you to realize your own spiritual poverty and lay those things at the foot of the cross.

None of us come to this table because we have earned it; we come to this table because the risen, victorious, worthy Jesus Christ has invited us. We come because we have nothing. We come because we trust in him for our life, for our salvation, for our hope.

Jesus said, “They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

8:45 communion

10:00 hymn in prep for communion

5:00 communion