

“Putting Everything In”

Mark 12:38-44

July 12, 2020

Read Mark 12:38-44

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

We start a new stage in our sermon series in the Gospel of Mark today. Heads up: this is going to be a hard sermon.

At the risk of dragging you through familiar territory, let me remind you where we are in the gospel of Mark. Mark introduced us to the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus began his ministry as a wandering preacher throughout the lands, gaining in popularity and fame. He 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.

He did enter Jerusalem. He rode triumphantly into Jerusalem with shouts of praise – signs of the coming of the Messiah. And, as we have seen in recent weeks, Mark reported how Jesus prevailed in successive controversies thrown at him: he confounded the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees. Even after he demonstrated who he was, all of these authorities continued to reject Jesus’ authority. Jesus answered every question and challenge to the extent 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 turned the tables to judge the Temple. He was judging the church – and that judgment was not complimentary.

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

1. Beware the Scribes

Jesus taught the disciples to “beware the scribes.” Jesus’ criticism of the scribes was in the political equivalent of inciting a rebellion against the Temple authorities. It was functionally “drain the swamp” and “de-fund the police.” 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 targeted 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 was 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 was where Jesus moved into a more direct attack, “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.”** This went directly to their integrity. It seems as if the scribes were acting like politicians in Washington who spend taxpayer money to run hearings that create a lot of noise – sound and fury, signifying nothing. 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 was Jesus saying? The scribes were corrupt and the Temple was corrupt. Let me be more specific: though there may have been criminal corruption; it was more the reality that they had perverted and distorted the purpose of the church. They lost sight of what the church was and what it was supposed to do.

In Jesus’ judgment, the Temple itself had become the object of worship and all the effort was going into preserving the building and the system they had established. The Temple had forgotten God. It was being operated to benefit those who work in the Temple. Their efforts were designed to protect the growth and power of the Temple. In short, in their rejection of Jesus, they demonstrated that they did not recognize God. Whether it was because they were not looking or did not want to see; if they did not recognize the truth when he came to them, they had 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/or
- b. The church becomes so earthly minded it is no heavenly good.

The Inwardly Focused Church

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 to God away 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.

This is a church that is inwardly focused. The inwardly focused church is an institutionalized church. The attention, energy, and processes are designed for those who are already “in” the club. Those who want to join need to get with the program and conform to the cultural expectations. The priorities include preserving the building, preserving the programs (regardless of outcome), and preserving the people. Worship becomes a product evaluated for the way it makes me feel, rather than a time of offering to be pleasing in God’s sight. Jesus’ judgment on the scribes here is reminiscent of Old Testament prophets criticizing empty rituals of the institutionalized church that the Temple leaders produced:

Mal. 1:6 A son honors his father, and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honor due me? And if I am a master, where is the respect due me? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. You say, “How have we despised your name?”⁷ By offering polluted food on my altar. And you say, “How have we polluted it?” By thinking that the LORD’S table may be despised.⁸ When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts.⁹ And now implore the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. The fault is yours. Will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts.¹⁰ Oh, that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hands.¹¹ For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.¹² But you profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted, and the food for it may be despised.¹³ “What a weariness this is,” you say, and you sniff at me, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD.¹⁴ Cursed be the cheat who has a male in the flock and vows to give it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished; for I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name is revered among the nations.

The problem with the institutionalized church is that its service does not really believe God is engaged in the midst of day-to-day life any more. It treats God as if things are now as they always will be. It is as if God is powerless to transform lives or to deal with sin after he has saved us – or, worse, not interested in his creation any longer. 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.

The Earthly-Focused Church

On the other hand, the church that is so earthly minded acts as though *it* has to do God’s work *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 assumes the responsibility of judging what is right. They do not trust God to do that work because God just does not seem to doing it. At least, God is not doing 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 with the earthly-focused church is that it perceives itself to be the strong arm of the kingdom of God. They have to right the wrongs. They use power to “speak truth to power” with no awareness of the irony of their tactics. In this scenario they have to do the work of effecting and judging social justice because God is absent, neglectful, uncaring, or irresponsible – or, worse, God does not understand how things *really* are or how change can *really* be effected. 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.”

Further, God’s kingdom was not ushered in through the expression of political power. He

though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
8 And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Friends, the church is not serving God when it succumbs to the temptation to judge and takes on a posture of righteous indignation. The church is not righteous by itself; it is righteous only insofar as it is rooted and connected to Christ.

Both of these are perversions of the purpose of the church and 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 offerings 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 came and she dropped in two coins. Mark used 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 did not condemn those who gave out of their abundance. He *was* comparing and his was commending the woman, but he did not condemn the other people who gave.

This woman was 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 was a widow. She does not speak here. We do not know if she interacted with anyone else while she was in the Temple; she did not during this one simple act which Jesus witnessed. All we know is she put in her two coins.

She held no security in her status, in her position, in power, in wealth; she literally had 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 – 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 was remarkable and commendable *because* her conduct was 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.

At the beginning of a Texas Hold ‘Em tournament, each poker player starts with the same number of chips. At any point in the game, the player can put all their “tournament life at risk” by betting everything. It is called “Going all in.” Going all in means that you are representing 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?

What does it look like to go all in? Let me point you to one of the missionary couples we support: Jeff and Abbie Nelson in Guatemala. Hear this from her most recent note to supporters:

We sit here helpless, mostly, to do anything meaningful in the face of the suffering around us. I’d love to share stories of mercy and work done, but the truth is, other than food aid and some pitifully inadequate medical care, there’s just not much we can do. (This is driving me nuts.). Guatemala City registered over a thousand new Covid cases today, and we see the death counts flicker by... 16 women here and 34 men there, special mention being made when there is a toddler or infant in the count. There was a story a few weeks ago about a teenage boy who died in the hospital and was BURIED before his mother had a chance to claim his body. The news today included a grim estimate of how little space is left in the cemetery in our community and another story about the astronomical number of hospital beds (19,000!) necessary to meet demand if the curve does not flatten out.

It's high season for psychologists, and Jeff spends his days talking people through their grief and angst, making interesting observations about how we are all just trying to make ourselves feel better in some small way. I roll over at dawn most mornings and check the news and social media, see people back home bickering about masks and breaking proverbial/actual dishes in sheer rage over the injustice and brokenness in the world. I see friends grieving, trying to act normal, trying to make sense of what is happening around us. I see the church occasionally speaking up, but mostly bewildered about how to do and be something of substance in these choppy waters. What does it all mean??? What does all this burning away of everything extra and many things of substance mean?

I'd like to hope that we come out of this thing wiser, closer to our Creator, more in awe of the incandescent fragility of life and full of love for our neighbor and for God himself. Who are you at the end of the day, when your sanity and continence are gone? When your job has fallen apart? When your mom is dying? When literally everything is hard and attempts at self-care are a joke? When your perfectly curated life turns out to be a whitewash that crumbles in the rain?

Many of you reading this don't know God—sometimes I wonder if I really know God—but for those of us that do, let me just say that if there is a God, and we are not him, that what He thinks about us is the truest thing about us. Our identity and sense of self should be centered in our Creator. Not our health, intelligence, sexuality, nationality, our roles or any of the million sandy hills upon which we cast our security. And if we can manage to find ourselves in the face of a great, good God that loves us and made us in His image, we can find joy and true love for the people around us welling up out of that place of security and abundance. We are praying these things for you and for us and for the strength to hang onto what is true in the face of so much struggle.

Abbie Nelson's got everything in. Hers is a hope in God *in and through* the hardships and realities of life. She has given all she has.

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 commended the woman because she gave everything to God and trusted in God for her life. This was exactly the road that Jesus was walking. He had come to Jerusalem to be rejected. He had come to Jerusalem to suffer. He had 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.

In trust and obedience to God, Jesus put everything in for us.

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 come to a close this morning, I invite you to spend a few moments to reflect on your own life; what have you withheld in 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.

Friends, we all stand empty-handed at the foot of the cross. He has given it all for us.

In response, we are to go out and share the gift we have received. The gift is not in the building, it is not in the programs, it is not in our criticism of the culture. The gift is in the love of God we have received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, “...She, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.” Brothers and Sisters in Christ: hold nothing back. Put it all in on Jesus.

Amen.

Questions:

1. Where is the balance between being so “heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good,” and so “earthly-minded that we are no heavenly good?”
2. Do you ever feel like God asks too much of us?
3. Is there anything you have withheld in your heart from God? If so, what and why?