

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/10/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, November 10th

Mark 12:38-44

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Beware of the scribes

This week's Gospel lection consists of two distinct pericopes. The first involves another emphasis on scribes. Unlike the scribe last week who agreed with Jesus' interpretation of the great commandment, Jesus warns about the hypocritical scribes who He accuses of self-glorification. This is followed by a widow giving to the temple her last coins. When these pericopes are viewed through the perspective of the Great Commandment, it reveals the dangers of the false teaching and corrupt religious systems that claim spiritual benefits accrue to those who give to the system. The Great Commandment thus becomes diluted with a sacrificial, works-based reward system that enriches the religious elites.

Mark 12:38-44 Commentary

The two pericopes are set during the final week of Jesus' life against the backdrop of mostly hostile encounters with the various leaders of the religious establishment. The first pericope (vv.38-40) is the third consecutive story involving scribes. The first is the positive encounter with the scribe discussing the Great Commandment which was the Gospel lection for last week (12:28-34). The second is Jesus asking, "*How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David*" (12:35-37)? The third scribal story begins:

³⁸ And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹ and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

There are some scholars who believe the latter half of verse 37 belongs with this section. In such a case, our text this week would begin "*And the great throng heard him gladly.*" One can only imagine crowds of people being greatly amused by Jesus openly criticizing the hypocrisy of the scribes that was plain to everyone! The scribes looking on must have been embarrassed. Yet it was the scribes who first accused Jesus of blaspheming at the very beginning of His ministry when He healed the paralytic lowered through the roof of the house in Capernaum (Mark 2:1-12) and it was the scribes who were among the religious leaders mocking Jesus as He was dying on the cross at the end of His earthly ministry (Mark 15:31,32).

This verse begins with a warning, "*Beware.*" The hypocrisy of the scribes is clear from the text. They wore greatly exaggerated robes which would immediately identify them and their status. They sought respect and honor. Their long prayers were for show only. They had corrupted religion for their own gain. The behavior of such scribes

contrasts with the scribe in 12:28-34 agreeing with Jesus about the Great Commandment. We are also reminded of Jesus' standards of Kingdom greatness and conversations with His disciples about who is the greatest (9:33-37; 10:35-45). Jesus' own words stand in stark contrast: "*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...*" (10:45).

Mark's word choice adds an interesting dimension. The transliteration of "*devour*" in 12:40 is *katesthiō*. This word is only used one more time by Mark and is found in the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:4): "*And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.*" This section of the parable is explained as follows (Mark 4:14-15): "*The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.*" If Jesus is the Sower, then the scribes are doing Satan's work by taking away the Gospel from crowds. Or perhaps He is equating the hardened hearts of the scribes to the least hospitable soil in the Parable of the Sower?

⁴¹ And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

The second pericope follows as almost a "See what I mean" as Jesus relocates to the treasury. The poor widow gave the equivalent of her last couple of dollars. The pivotal link between the two pericopes is the idea that the scribes *devour* widows' houses. We read in Deuteronomy 14:29 and 26:12 how there is provision in the law to support widows. Yet the scribes, who were the interpreters of the law, under the pretense of legal counseling and advice on estate management they took advantage of the widows in their unprotected state. They either extorted large sums of money or used the property for their own gain. So much for being shepherds of Israel.

Reflection and Application

Since this Gospel lection falls on or around Stewardship Sunday, it is often used to emphasize giving. If both the pericopes in the Gospel lection for this week are considered in tandem against last week's Gospel lection of the scribe who agreed with Jesus as the greatest commandment being to love God and love our neighbor, this text is more about false teachers than giving. The behavior of the scribes Jesus refers to in vv.38-40 demonstrate they love themselves more than God or neighbor. They abuse their status and responsibility. They gave impressive amounts, but this was out of their abundance (and perhaps ill gotten). They are hypocrites. They represent fake religion. They are thus false teachers leeching from the people they are supposed to protect. The widow, on the other hand, had been led to believe she had to give all that she had to the temple treasury. The Jewish religious system, as corrupt as it was, was all this widow knew. One who was perhaps herself being abused by the religious system had not given up on God. She gave out of her poverty. This is what the system had done to her – she was broke. She took what she had remaining and gave it to the temple system. The widow was a victim of the very system she was contributing to.

Verses 38-40 are Jesus' last public words and thus add weight to the topic. Jesus took this opportunity to warn the people over the hypocrisy of the religious fakes who ran the corrupt system for their own gain. He then showed His disciples how the widow was a victim of this system. Why is it then that so many people still fall for the same fake system today? Why do outward symbols, rituals, and smoke and mirror emotional ploys still succeed? Why is the prosperity gospel so popular in our time? How many sermons will be delivered on this text that challenge the hearers to be like this widow and pay less attention to what happens to money collected within the system?