

AM Mark 12 Two Kinds of Religion

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[0 : 00] to Mark's Gospel, Mark chapter 12. Mark chapter 12. And Jesus began to speak to them in parables.

A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it, and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.

When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed.

And so with many others, some they beat and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son.

[1 : 10] Finally he sent him to them, saying, They will respect my son. But those tenants said to one another, This is the heir.

Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours. And they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture?

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

And they were seeking to arrest him, but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

[2 : 11] And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. And they came and said to him, Teacher, we know that you are true, and do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them or should we not? But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, Why put me to the test?

Bring me a denarius, and let me look at it. And they brought one. And he said to them, Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said to him, Caesar's.

Jesus said to them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

And they marveled at him. And Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow, and raise up offspring for his brother.

[3 : 37] There were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and when he died, left no offspring. And the second took her and died, leaving no offspring.

And the third likewise. And the seven left no offspring. Last of all, the woman also died. In the resurrection, when they arise again, whose wife will she be?

For the seven had her as wife. Jesus said to them, Is this not the reason you are wrong?

Because you know neither the scriptures, nor the power of God. For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

[4 : 46] He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong. And one of the scribes came up, and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well,

asked him, Which commandment is the most important of all?

Jesus answered, The most important is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

The second is this, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. And the scribe said to him, You are right, teacher.

You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings, and sacrifices.

And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God.

[6 : 08] And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions. And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, How can the scribe say that the Christ is the son of David?

David himself in the Holy Spirit declared, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet. David himself calls him Lord.

So how is he his son? And the great throng heard him gladly. And in his teaching he said, Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and like greetings in the marketplaces, and of the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers.

They will receive the greater condemnation. And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box.

Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. 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.

[7 : 47] 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.

Amen. And may God bless to us that reading from his word and to his name be the prey. Turn back with me in your Bibles to the passage we read.

Mark chapter 12. I'd like to focus this morning on the closing verses of the chapter from verse 38 onwards.

Mark 12 verses 38 to 44, which I'd like to look at with you under the title, Two Kinds of Religion. Two Kinds of Religion. Many people don't believe in God.

[8 : 52] If you're one of them, then close your ears for the next few minutes. I was listening to the PM program in my car one day.

And that was how the presenter introduced a piece about a debate in the Church of England. Many people don't believe in God.

If you're one of them, then you can close your ears for the next few minutes. The presenter was, in effect, apologising for running a piece on Christianity.

Other subjects aren't treated in the same way. If there's a piece about sport, for instance, no one says, if you're not interested in sport, you can switch off now.

No, the fact is that in our society, Christianity is no longer regarded as mainstream. And theological issues are considered largely irrelevant.

[10 : 07] But the society in which Jesus lived was very different. It was a very religious society. People were committed to Judaism.

And they were caught up in its rituals and practices. But what the passage we're looking at this morning highlights is that not every kind of religion is good.

Mark highlights aspects of Jesus' teaching to draw a contrast between the religion of the scribes on the one hand and the quiet devotion of a poor widow on the other.

He's not attacking Judaism in and of itself. Prior to Jesus' death and resurrection, Judaism was the centuries-old God-ordained means by which men and women lived in fellowship with God.

The point Mark is making is that even true religion can be abused.

[11 : 27] I'd like to look with you at these verses under two headings. First of all, in verses 38 to 40, we have hypocritical religion.

Hypocritical religion. And then in verses 41 to 44, we have heart religion. Heart religion.

Let's take on board what Jesus says about these things and see what it means for us today. First of all then, in verses 38 to 40, we have hypocritical religion.

Let's read these verses again. In his teaching he said, Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and of the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers.

They will receive the greater condemnation. The scribes were experts in the law of Moses.

[12 : 43] They studied and preserved the law contained in the Hebrew scriptures. They lectured on it and they helped administer it.

Some of them were members of the religious court, the Sanhedrin. The scribes spent their days immersed in the Old Testament, trying to tease out its meaning.

So if anyone knew God's will for life and living, it surely was the scribes, or so you would have thought.

But Jesus doesn't commend them. Instead, he says that they focus on their privileged position in Jewish society.

They like to walk around in long robes that draw attention to who they are. They like being greeted with due deference in the marketplace.

[13 : 49] In the synagogues, they sit in the best seats, no doubt where everyone could see them. And at feasts, they sit at the top table.

The scribes like to feel special. They like being given special treatment. They like being accorded status. They get a real kick out of all that.

But it gets even darker. Jesus says in verse 40 that they devour widows' houses. They are respected members of the community.

And because they are looked up to, they win the trust and confidence of vulnerable widows. And instead of taking care of them, they exploit them.

And they get them to hand over their money. Concern for the poor and vulnerable is a major theme in the Old Testament. But the scribes aren't bothered about social justice.

[14 : 51] All they are interested in is what they can get for themselves. Of course, they appear very pious.

Jesus says that they make long prayers. But he says that they do that for a pretense. There is no reality behind their prayers. To coin a phrase, the scribes are praying to the galleries.

Their religion is not real religion. It is mere religiosity. So the picture which Jesus presents of the scribes is shocking.

The clear implication of what he says is that they are into religion for what they can get out of. They like the trappings of religion. The social status.

The sense of privilege. The reputation for godliness. They like the power and influence they wield. They do their own thing under the cover of religion.

[15 : 59] And so they end up living lives which are inconsistent with the Old Testament scriptures they profess to value.

God requires them to act justly to love mercy and to walk humbly with their God. But they turn all that on its head.

Their religion is hypocritical. It's not what it appears to be. Yes, they have a veneer of godliness but underneath they are thoroughly worldly ungodly.

And for that reason Jesus warns people to be on their guard against them. The scribes might deceive people with their hypocritical religion but they cannot deceive God.

The final words of verse 40 are solemn. Jesus says they will receive the greater condemnation. Jesus is making the point that they will receive God's condemnation.

[17 : 13] And their condemnation will be all the greater because they know what they are doing. They know the scriptures. They know God's revealed will.

Lack of knowledge isn't the problem. Quite the opposite. They know what they should do. But they don't do it. They sin against light.

And as Jesus says elsewhere of those to whom much is given much will be required. You see privilege carries responsibility.

Well that was the scribes in Jesus' day. the first century world may feel very remote to us today.

And yet even in our world even though religion is less popular than it used to be at least here in the West it may well be that much of what passes as religion is hypocritical.

[18 : 24] critical. How can we apply what Jesus says here to ourselves? Well for a start we should recognize that the scribes were religious leaders and one obvious application is to church leaders people who have standing in churches.

churches. There are I suspect people in leadership positions in various branches of the professing Christian church who are into religion for what they get out of it.

They have no real piety. They don't know God but they love the outward trappings of religion.

Perhaps it's the stamp of respectability that church leadership still gives in some quarters.

perhaps they're into the mystery of high church sacramentalism. Perhaps it's the privileged access they have to people often when they are at their most vulnerable.

It is possible for church leaders religion to be hypocritical. Nor are evangelicals immune. We too may set store by status.

[19 : 45] We too may be attracted by power and influence. The pressures may be very subtle. An older minister I know was given wise advice when he became a minister.

He was told and I think it was an older minister who said this to him people will try to put you on a pedestal and before long you will want to be there.

those of us in leadership positions need to examine our own hearts. What really motivates us?

Is it love for the Lord or something else? Do we love working for the Lord more than we love the Lord himself?

And what about the rest of us? what does this passage have to say to us? Well it's worth noting that in these verses Jesus is warning the ordinary people against the scribes.

[21 : 01] He's asking them to beware of leaders whose religion is hypocritical. And that advice applies to us too.

we need to be on our guard against church leaders whose religion is not all that it should be.

Their churches may have a real buzz about them. They may appear successful but ultimately they won't do us any good. We need to value churches where the gospel is preached sincerely and where leaders shepherd the flock of God with genuine care and concern for our spiritual well-being. we also need to look at ourselves. What motivates our Christian commitment? It is possible for our Christian commitment to be very me focused.

Am I a Christian because it makes me feel good? Because it happens to suit my needs.

[22 : 22] Do I attend church simply to have my needs met? Now don't misunderstand me. It is good to come to church. There are all sorts of good reasons for coming.

But we need to heed the challenge of Jesus' reply to the scribe in verse 28. We read how this scribe came along to speak to Jesus and he asked him the question which commandment is the most important of all?

And Jesus' reply was this, the most important is you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

That is the most important commandment. And that is a challenge for each one of us. Do we love the Lord first and foremost?

Do we love him for who he is and for what he has done? That surely tests the reality of our religion.

[23 : 41] And it is interesting that the scribe who asked Jesus that question said, teacher, you have spoken well.

And Jesus saw that although he was a scribe, he was someone who was sincerely seeking the truth. Not all the scribes had hypocritical religion, obviously.

But many of them did. so the question for you and for me is what motivates our Christian commitment?

Do we love the Lord first and foremost? Where is our focus? If our focus is on the fringe benefits of Christianity and not on the Lord, then sooner or later that will be exposed.

It is a fact that a significant number of the teenagers and students who have been actively involved in church and Christian unions fall away from a Christian commitment within a few years.

[25 : 03] For a time they enjoy being part of a vibrant group which provides them, provides mutual support. But when they leave the student world, when they go out into the world of work, they may not find Christian peers all that readily and it is difficult to get stuck into a church.

And yet that is so important. For without it, you can start drifting. Every stage of life presents its own challenge to consistent Christian living.

Even those who have a genuine faith may backslide. But if we find ourselves drifting, if we find ourselves living in a way that is inconsistent with what we know to be Christian standards, we need to ask ourselves if our faith is real.

On that day when we stand before the Lord Jesus as our judge, hypocritical religion will not pass muster. He will discern the secrets of our hearts and pass unerring judgment.

Only those who love him in response to his love for them, only those who are trusting in the Lord Jesus will go to be with him.

[26 : 36] Our religion won't save us. Our church going won't save us. Our church connection won't save us. Elsewhere Jesus says, not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

on that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name?

And then will I declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

you see, among those who fall under Jesus' judgment will be some who claim to be his followers, but whose religion was hypocritical.

They may have had religious credentials, but they were not in relationship with him. Being religious is not enough.

[27 : 48] hypocritical religion, that was the religion of many of the scribes. But in the second half of our passage, we have a very different kind of religion.

We have what I have called heart religion. And it's demonstrated not by a religious leader, but by a poor widow, a poor anonymous widow, someone to whom the scribes wouldn't have given a second thought.

So let's read verses 41 to 44 again. And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums, and a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny.

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, 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.

Jesus is watching the people in the temple as they put their offerings into the offering box. Some rich people are giving large sums, no doubt they're doing it with a tremendous flourish.

[29 : 28] And then along comes a poor widow. widow. She's a nobody in most people's eyes, but she catches Jesus' eye.

She makes no display of what she's doing, and the offering, she slips into the offering box is almost negligible in value, just two small copper coins.

She's an unimpressive individual who gives an offering that is unimpressive. But that's not how Jesus sees it.

He calls his disciples over, and he says to them, truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box, 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. Appearances are deceptive.

[30 : 47] There's more to this widow than meets the eye. The rich give large sums of money they can afford to. After all, they have plenty of money left to spend on themselves.

But this widow has little to start off with, and what she has, she gives to the Lord. Her two small coins, Mark says, were all she had to live on.

The measure of her giving is seen not in what she gives, but in what she has left. From that perspective, her giving is truly extravagant.

She loves the Lord and his worship, and her offering reflects the devotion of an undivided heart.

Mark wants us to see her as a model of radical discipleship. she is the kind of disciple Jesus is looking for, one who is prepared to lose her life for him and for the gospel.

[32 : 03] Her religion is real, there is nothing synthetic or hypocritical about it, it is heart religion, religion that has transformed her heart, and in turn has transformed her living and her giving.

It is perhaps worth saying that what makes this widow's religion real is not her extravagant giving. It is not her giving which validates her religion, rather it is because her religion is real that she is motivated to give.

her giving is a reflection of a transformed heart. Jesus isn't saying that the way to be accepted by God is to give him all your money.

We cannot earn acceptance with God. Acceptance with God is entirely dependent on what he has done in the Lord Jesus.

He died the death we deserved, and lived the life we ought to have lived. We are saved only through faith in Jesus.

[33 : 22] But saving faith is never alone. We are saved to do good works, works which reflect our gratitude for our salvation.

And these good works include giving the Lord a fitting proportion of our money. This widow, we are told, gave all that she had to live on.

Does that mean that the mark of heart religion is that one gives all one has to the Lord? Well, there is a sense in which the Lord has a claim on all we are and have.

That is true in principle. We are not our own. We have been bought with a price. And over the years there have been some Christians, some very wealthy Christians, who have felt led by the Lord to give away all they owned.

Where the Lord has led them to do that, he has honoured what they have done. But that isn't required of all Christians. What the New Testament encourages us all to do is to give to the Lord's work on a regular basis as we are able, in accordance with our means.

[34 : 58] Under the old covenant, worshippers gave a tenth of their income and many Christians have seen a tenth or a tithe as a useful rule of thumb.

But the key to Christian giving, as indeed to Christian living in general, is a transformed heart. A heart that loves God in response to his love for us.

I close with a testimony I heard an Anglican vicar give many years ago when I was a student. As a young man, this vicar worked in London.

He was not from a church background. but at some point he decided that he ought to read the Bible purely out of general interest.

And he was doing that as he commuted in and out of London on the train. There was one evening when he met a friend after work and he went along to a concert.

[36 : 23] and it was later that evening when he got on his train that he was joined by two men who came into the carriage.

Not long after they set off, one of the men had a fit. But his friend said, it's okay, this happens a lot, I know exactly what to do.

And then he went on to explain that they had both been soldiers. They had been involved in a combat situation at one point.

And the man who was speaking had been seriously wounded. His friend had gone to rescue him. He had done so at real risk to himself.

And sadly, he had been badly injured. And it was as a result of his injuries that he regularly had fits.

[37 : 35] man went on to say that he was now his friend's carer. And he added, he did so much for me, nothing would be too much for me to do for him.

now this had happened before the man who was later to become a vicar got his Bible out, but he decided that he would carry on his reading as he got his Bible out of his bag and started reading. And he happened to be in the Gospels reading the account of the crucifixion. as he did that, the words which the man had said were ringing in his ears.

He did so much for me, nothing that I could do for him would be too much. And he realized that these words applied even more relevantly to Jesus who had given his life for sinners like him. he realized that Jesus had given his life so that whoever believed in him would not perish but have eternal life.

[39 : 10] And so that evening that man put his trust in the Lord Jesus and became a Christian and his life changed dramatically.

He ended up becoming a vicar and spending his life in Christian ministry. He did so much for me, nothing would be too much for me to do for him.

That surely is the key to heart religion. we respond to what the Lord Jesus has done for us. We give ourselves only in response to his self-giving.
Shall we pray? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.