

Sunday, November 7, 2021 – “Noticing Who Jesus Notices ”
– Bible Study & Reflection on Mark 12:38-44

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Mark 12:38-44 (*Common English Bible*).

³⁸ As he was teaching, Jesus said, “Watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. ³⁹ They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. ⁴⁰ They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, and to show off they say long prayers. They will be judged most harshly.”

⁴¹ Jesus sat across from the collection box for the temple treasury and observed how the crowd gave their money. Many rich people were throwing in lots of money. ⁴² One poor widow came forward and put in two small copper coins worth a penny. ⁴³ Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who’s been putting money in the treasury. ⁴⁴ All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on.”

The plight of the most vulnerable and the responsibilities of the powerful seem to be the subject of this Sunday’s Gospel. Jesus tells his followers to beware of the legal experts (“the scribes” to be precise), who, through their scriptural study and their deep, active piety, are supposedly among the most pious in the Israel of Jesus’ day. Remember, these scribes were the officials who took care of divorces and the dispersing and transferring of properties after a man’s death. Jesus has moved from general instruction of his followers to pointed criticism of Israel’s religious establishment. It’s a stinging critique of the religious elite.

Jesus warns, “Watch out for the legal experts” While Jesus has some choice words of criticism for these scribes, it is important to note that in first century Judaism, the scribes would have been considered the most devout and pious persons who had devoted themselves to the full-time study of the sacred scriptures. The scribes were the religious experts, the professional interpreters of scripture whose advice would be sought by anyone aspiring to be in God’s kingdom. That’s why Jesus’ scathing criticism of the scribes would have been quite a shock.

Jesus matches the scribes’ criticism of him with some tough criticism of them, accusing them of extortion – milking the poor for their own personal financial gain. When I think of the scribes, I cannot help but think of our contemporary televangelists.

“Watch out for these preachers, prancing around in their fancy suits and elegant robes as people are mesmerized by their performance in public places. They always take the best seats of honor in the places worship and community celebrations. Yet they steal widows’ houses, and they show off with their long prayers. They have received their greater judgment from God” (My paraphrase).

There are other places in the Gospels where Jesus criticizes the abuse of prayer and religious practices. Here Jesus moves on to charge that these religious leaders “devour widows’ houses.” These scribes are not only praying in the wrong way, they are defrauding and robbing the most vulnerable of the poor. In Jesus’ day, widows and children whose parents had died were completely reliant on the contract of the widow’s husband (in our day, the will) and orphans on the benevolence of their relatives. That’s why widows and orphans are frequently mentioned by the prophets as persons who are of great concern to God. Both the

Law and the Prophets speak of God's justice for these persons. It's shocking that these purportedly "religious," powerful people, the scribes, who are charged by scripture to defend widows and orphans, have so perverted their office as to defraud these vulnerable people. Jesus is not just criticizing the rich, as he so often does, but he is also criticizing religious leaders.

While speaking of widows, Jesus notes a poor widow whose behavior he contrasts with that of the scribes. These religious criminals devour widows' houses; this poor widow gives her whole house at the Temple treasury. In noting the widow's gift, Jesus once again turns the tables so that those who look great, look small. Jesus notes and blesses a "little one," one of the "least of these."

This woman is a lover of God, but she is being victimized by those who presumed to be God's representatives. This poor woman is doing what she has been told by the religious authorities to do. She is innocent of her complicity in their corrupt religious system.

But Jesus sees her, in all of her innocence and goodness, and God does too. That same God who sees, is now busy dismantling the corrupt religious system through God's Anointed One, Jesus.

It's a sad picture that Mark lays before us. It's sad that there are corrupt religious leaders who prey upon the goodwill of people, especially poor people. But God sees and God knows and God is working, through Jesus' confrontation of the scribes, to set things right.

And maybe Mark also means this as encouragement to us not to give up in setting things right, that is, God's work of justice, through our own actions. Even though the poor may be vulnerable to corrupt, political, economic, and even religious systems, God sees and God knows and God is moving to stand up for the poor.

Thus we have in this week's Gospel a word of warning for those of us who are powerful, who busily administer systems that dominate the poor and vulnerable and a word of encouragement to those who have suffered victimization. Here's hope for the poor and vulnerable. God's good news may not be so good for the rich and the powerful, especially if they presume to be religious. And that includes a lot of people in our society. If we have been led to believe that God is an impartial, disengaged observer of injustice, religious or otherwise, then we have been misled. God takes sides in these matters. God is for justice. Jesus notices the little people who we may not notice. The injustice will not continue forever.

Hopefully Yours for the Sake of God's Justice,

Pastor Greg Rupright