

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

When Less is More

(Mark 12:38-44)

Study #26

Introduction: The death of altruism...

Why do we do what we do when we are doing what the Bible says to do?

It's a decent question. And frankly, there are quite a few reasons, motives, that might prompt us to a Bible-obeying life.

They include a desire to honor God, gratitude for the grace He's given, and a general recognition that living biblically is a wise way to live.

One motive that isn't often said out loud, but that makes its way into our thinking, I think, is that we obey the Bible and do what God says to do because (channeling Wilford Brimley), "*Doggone, it. It's the right thing to do.*"

This idea that we do what we do simply because it is right to do it is called *altruism*.

Altruism consists of sacrificing something (time, energy, money, possessions, etc...) with no expectation of any compensation or benefits, either direct, or indirect.

It is easy to adopt the mindset that to live as a Christian is to live altruistically. We serve Jesus because, well, it is the right thing to do.

We love and serve and give and help and pray with no regard to any personal benefits that may come our way as a result of doing so.

After all, Jesus gave Himself on the cross for our sins because He loved us, right? Yes He did. He didn't die on the cross for His own benefit, but for ours, right? Well, yes and no...

While it is the truth that Jesus died on the cross for our sins because He loved us, it is not the whole truth. There is more to the story of why Jesus died for us on the cross than His love for us. His self-sacrificing ways were more than altruistic decisions to "*do the right thing.*"

And as we conclude this morning we'll get what may be an eye-opening look at what else was going on that moved Jesus to do what He did for us and what that might say to us, who want to imitate Him.

Last Sunday we re-launched our study in the Gospel of Mark with a look at the first part of the last Tuesday of Jesus' life.

On that Tuesday He was challenged by the various power brokers in Jerusalem - chief priests and scribes, Pharisees and Herodians, Sadducees - and He bested them all.

This morning as we return to Mark, Jesus is still in Jerusalem and it is still Tuesday. However, He now turns His attention from the groups of people who had asked Him challenging questions to those who were genuinely interested in hearing Him teach.

This would have been His twelve disciples, along with others.

Some of them might have been having their first exposure to Jesus. Some might have known of Him or have heard Him teach before. Others, seeing Jesus for the first time, might have just really enjoyed the shellacking He had just given to the religious elite.

It was to these interested and open hearers that Jesus turned His attention and began to speak.

I find it fascinating that in Matthew's Gospel, at this exact time in Jesus' final week, He spoke condemning words against the religious rulers of Israel and took thirty six long verses to get 'er done. (Matthew 23).¹

Here, He speaks exclusively against the scribes² and takes exactly three verses to do so.³ But what He has to say to them here is every bit as scathing as what He said in a more expanded way in Matthew.

He starts off by issuing a stern warning against imitating the scribes, and the first warning has to do with their dress code.

Greedy Scribes Present a Word of Warning to the Wise (vv. 38-40)

The Behavior of the Offending Scribes (vv. 38-40)

Greedy for r-e-s-p-e-c-t (vv. 38-39)

[38] In His teaching He was saying: "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, [39] and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets"

The clothing of the scribes

The average Jew of the first century would wear the brightest colors possible. Festive garments are fun to wear today, and they were then, too.

But the robes worn by the scribes weren't festive or bright. No. They were long, linen robes with no color to them at all. They were stark, white.

There was something about those robes, with their long fringe at the bottom hem, that spoke of purity and seriousness. "*Party time!*" didn't come to mind when you saw a scribe walking toward you. They enjoyed carrying about a weightiness, a gravitas.

And when they did walk toward you, you had better pay them their due respect.

Deferential greetings

It was required social etiquette to stand when a scribe strolled by. Bow low. Show respect. They liked it when people did that.

They, who knew the Law of God, thought it appropriate when people showed them deference, gave them a little r-e-s-p-e-c-t.

People said, "*Good morning, Rabbi.*" or "*Greetings, Master.*"

And whenever there was a gathering - whether for worship or socializing - they really liked it when they were treated as VIP's.

Seats of honor in the synagogue and at banquets

In a typical Jewish synagogue the chief seats were those closest to the front, nearest to the box that held the scrolls of Scripture. Seated in those chief seats would be the scribes.

At parties and banquets, right next to the guest of honor would be the scribe of the community. Scribes were given honor over other guests, even over the aged and family. The scribes really like that kind of treatment.⁴

So Jesus warns His listeners - then and now - against imitating the scribes because of their appetite, their **greed**, for being put on a pedestal and for receiving the respect they believed they so richly deserved.

He also warns against imitating the scribes' greed for material gain.

¹ Luke also has three verses to describe this diatribe in His accounting of Jesus' final week - 20:45-47. But for a longer rebuke, see Luke 11:37-54.

² See Jesus' strained relationships with the Scribes as seen in Mark's Gospel: 3:22-30; 7:1-5; 11; 18, 27ff; 12:12.

³ After the recent positive interaction with the one perceptive scribe, it is a little surprising to read Jesus' scathing rebuke of scribes, generally. We are left to suppose that the decency of the scribe of vv. 28-37 was an exception to the rule.

⁴ Notice Jesus' own repudiation of the choice seat at the last supper when He washed His disciples' feet. (John 13)

Greedy for riches (v. 40a)

[40a] “who devour widows’ houses”

The scribes’ predicament

Now I’ll grant that the scribes were in something of a predicament. By and large, they weren’t wealthy. In fact, in Jerusalem, scribes were classified among the poor.

They were largely dependent on gifts people would give or on benefactors for their support. And in the first century, scribes were forbidden to charge money for teaching the Law.

It wasn’t hard to find well-respected, but poor scribes. Evidently, though, some of them found ways to land on the other side of the tracks.

The scribes’ practice

Jesus says that they “*devour widows’ houses*” and even if we don’t exactly know what that means, it sounds terrible!

One of the recurring themes in Scripture is the vulnerability of widows and the need to care for widows.

Having suffered the heartache of losing their life partner, they have also lost their means of support, materially and emotionally. So, to defraud a widow was particularly despicable.

Based on what Jesus says here, these scribes were guilty of exactly that.

They would sometimes take a house as a pledge (collateral) for unpaid debts, or they would charge excessive legal fees. They might exploit the widow’s hospitality, or mismanage her money to their own advantage if they had been made a trustee over an estate.

They might even try to motivate a widow to give to them or to the temple/synagogue through guilt.

Far from feeling compassion for the widow, the scribe believed, “*If you have what I want, I am justified in taking it.*”

The scribe’s priority was always, first and foremost, #1, ME. And that was true whether we’re talking about demanding respect, feathering their own nests at the expense of widows, or building up a great (even if undeserved) reputation.

Greedy for reputation (v. 40b)

[40b]... “and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers”

These guys were famous for their prayers. Their prayers were long and eloquent.

But theirs were the kinds of prayers that never made it past the ceiling because their prayers were only speeches to the crowd, intended to impress. They weren’t addressed to God.

Start to finish, they were all about wanting people to think well of them. These scribes Jesus describes are ostentatious, exploitative, and hypocritical. And they will receive their due from God.

The Condemnation of the Offending Scribes (v. 40b)

[40b]... “these will receive greater condemnation.”

Of all people, the scribes should have been the most sincerely zealous, God-centered people around. After all, they had the most familiarity with God’s Word. They should have been the people who were all about living for God. Period.

Yet they weren’t.

Here, Jesus singled them out as the people most saddled with an insatiable appetite to be respected by those around them (not God), to seek gain for this life (not the next), and to use their religious service (even prayer!) as a way to gain a sterling reputation.

That kind of living invites the judgment of God, and Jesus assured His listeners that the judgment of God will come to these scribes.

If Jesus had cemented the animosity of His enemies by the previous exchanges of this Tuesday (11:27--12:37), these words against the scribes would have done nothing to soften their resolve to see Him killed.

He has identified the scribes as the kinds of people we don't want to be, anti-role models. And we move from this diatribe against the scribes to a scene where Jesus points out an unassuming but completely worthy role model.

It's still Tuesday and Jesus is still in the Temple. Now He walks over to a bench and takes a seat. We locate Jesus in a certain area of the temple known as the Court of the Women.

One Generous Role Model Invites Our Imitation (vv. 41-44)

Jesus, Watching Givers (v. 41a)

The layout of the Court of the Women

The Court of the Women was not a place in the temple reserved only for women. It was just the part of the temple nearest to the Holy Place to which women were permitted to go, unless they were offering sacrifice.

There was always lots of activity in The Court of the Women. One main reason was that this area was where people would bring their offerings for the support of the temple.

As you entered this court you would have seen thirteen "trumpet chests" lined up against a wall.

Someone coming to the temple to pay his or her tithe or to make a sacrifice (in equivalent monetary value) would walk up to one of the wooden chests and drop coins into a ram's horn fixed on top of that chest.

The ram's horn was wide at the top and narrow at the bottom, thus making it easy to toss the money in and impossible to retrieve the money once it passed through the bottom of the horn into the chest.

As you might imagine, this kind of giving made quite a racket (and the more coins, the more noise) prompting Jesus to refer to this as "*sounding the trumpet*" (Matthew 6:2)

Each of these trumpet chests was a receptacle into which a worshipper would put money. And each chest was labeled for a particular kind of donation.

You could pay the temple tax or you could make any one of a number of sacrifice offerings (in money). Or, you could simply make a "freewill offering" of whatever amount to contribute to the upkeep of the temple and the support of its ministries.⁵

Jesus sat down on a bench on the opposite side of the Court of the Women and watched as men and women tossed money into the various rams' horns.

A very observant Jesus...

[41a] And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury...

It would have been easy to have known, from a distance, WHAT people were putting into the boxes. At least one student of these things suggests that the amount of a gift and the purpose for which it was intended were shouted out by the donor to the priest in charge.⁶

So Jesus would have known that *this* worshiper gave six gold coins as a freewill offering and *that* worshiper gave a dozen denarii toward a certain sacrifice and *that* other one gave ten silver pieces as a freewill offering.

But what is striking is that Mark doesn't comment on Jesus' knowledge of WHAT was given, but on HOW the money was given.

He saw streams of people making their way to the offering chests, with all kinds of gifts, made in all kinds of ways.

⁵ Charitable donations for the poor were made separately.

⁶ So, Billerbeck, cited in Lane's commentary, p. 442, footnote 83.

The Givers Jesus Watched (vv. 41b-42)

Rich people put in large sums (v. 41b)

[41b]...and many rich people were putting in large sums.

Some of my reference books tell me that different kinds of coins made different kinds of sounds. You could tell who was tossing in wooden nickels and who was giving solid gold.

Jesus saw some ordinary Jewish citizens giving what they could, or what they figured they should. And, He saw many rich people putting in a lot of money.⁷

Perhaps announcing the size of their gift as they gave, He watched as a lot of silver and gold noisily made its way through the ram's horns on its way to the box underneath.

And while He was observing these average and wealthy donors, His attention was drawn to one solitary figure. She is a widow and her offering is piddling, negligible next to the offerings of the wealthy.

One widow gave two small coins (v. 42)

[42] A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent.

Mark tells us that she was not only a widow. She was a poor widow. And her poverty is abundantly evident by the offering she brought.

We aren't told about her demeanor, but I've got to wonder how she felt as she made her way to the trumpet chests to give what she would have known was way less in monetary value than what those around her were giving.

Was she ashamed to be seen here? Was she embarrassed to bring what she brought? Did she walk confidently, or did she shuffle, trying to be inconspicuous?

Mark tells us that she gave two small copper coins - not silver or gold. They are "leptas" which, together, amounted to about a "cent."

The lepton was the smallest denomination of currency available, similar to our penny, but with much less buying power.⁸

Her gift was small. First century documents tell us that she could not have given less. Literally. It was not legal to give only one lepton. To give anything this widow had to give at least two lepta.

My guess is that nobody in the Court of the Women knew when this woman gave. The tiny sound of the two copper coins dropping was so soft that it would have drawn no attention over the crash of the heavy thud of the silver and gold.

Plink. Plink.

Then, you can see her turning around and walking out. Business continues, as usual, with more and more worshipers lining up to give. Nobody paid any attention to the poor widow - except Jesus.

When He saw "how" this widow gave He knew that He had finally seen what He had been looking for when He had first come to the temple early in the morning.

He hadn't seen it in any of the exchanges with the groups of the religious elite. He had warned against the exact opposite of what He saw in the widow when He spoke of the scribes' greed for respect, money, and reputation.

But He saw it as plain as day in the widow's offering.

⁷ After all, it was the Passover season and liberality may have been the result of some Jewish pilgrims being in Jerusalem for their one trip to the Holy City per year.

⁸ In the currency of that day, the coin was worth the value of the metal. The lepton was a very small copper coin, less than a centimeter in diameter.

And He quickly called His disciples together to point out this great “something” to them. He started off the way He always started off when He had some really important point to make.

The Greater Giver (vv. 43-44)

Listen up! This is important!! (v. 43a)

[43a] Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, “Truly I say to you...”

When Jesus says, ***“Truly I say to you...”*** it is code for *“Hey guys, sit up and take notice!”* This is something He doesn’t want us to miss.

“Guys, this is good. Did you see what that widow just did? Did you really see it? THAT’s what I’m talking about!”

And He went on to explain why her giving was so remarkable.

God’s assessment of a gift’s value (v. 44)

[44]...they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.”

The nature of the widow’s gift

Now, let’s think about this widow’s offering for a minute.

It was likely placed in one of the six or seven “freewill offering” boxes.

Do you suppose that both of those coins were put to the best possible use? Maybe. Is it likely that the money given to the temple was sometimes not wisely stewarded? Probably. It’s not hard to believe that the managers of the temple didn’t always use money that was given in the best way possible.

And did the gift of this widow actually help the temple? It certainly wouldn’t have hurt. But, no, a penny doesn’t go a very long way toward materially benefitting the temple.

And what about the effect of the gift on the widow herself? From what Jesus says here, giving this amount of money put the poor widow in a world of hurt. This may have been the money she would have used to buy her next meal. Did Jesus like to see poor widows starve? I don’t think so.

So, again, what was it that Jesus thought was so commendable about her offering?

There was one thing about her offering that made it stand out like a sore thumb among all the other offerings made in the Court of the Women on that Day. In a word, it was *sacrificial*.

God delights in sacrifice

God delights when His people give offerings that represent genuine sacrifice. He always has. And that was what thrilled Him about the widow’s offering.

To God, the value of her offering was not found in the dollar amount or in the percentage of her income it represented, but in the impact it was going to have on her life. It cost her something.

This is not the only place in the Bible we find this idea of the beauty of sacrificial giving.

In 2 Corinthians Paul commended the churches in the region of Macedonia (part of ancient Greece) for having given abundantly out of their ***“deep poverty”*** and while ***“in a great ordeal of affliction.”*** (2 Corinthians 8:1-2)

In a few weeks we’ll see another example from Mark’s Gospel where Jesus applauds a woman who anointed Him with extremely expensive perfume, an over-the-top gift of ridiculous extravagance - and He commended her for it.

And then there is the story of what King David did recorded at the very end of the Old Testament book of 2 Samuel.

In 2 Samuel 24 we read about David’s sin of taking a census of the people of Israel.

The reason it was sinful for David to have numbered the people was because it prompted him to trust in the strength of numbers rather than in the Lord.

As punishment for his sin, God sent a pestilence on the nation of Israel, a plague that killed thousands of people. This plague was stopped right at the threshing floor of a man named Araunah, who lived near Jerusalem.

David approached Araunah to buy his threshing floor so that he could build an altar there for the worship of God. Araunah insisted that David simply take the threshing floor as a gift.

David's response highlights the same thing we are seeing today in Mark's Gospel. He told Araunah, *[2 Samuel 24:24] "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God which cost me nothing."*⁹

David knew that God would value the sacrifices made on the altar he built more if he purchased the land on which it was built, rather than receive it as a gift.

And this poor widow who came to bring her offering on Jesus' final Tuesday somehow sensed that God would value her sacrificial gift, even though she knew that it was of little actual benefit to the operation of the Temple.

As far as we can tell, Jesus didn't holler out at the woman as she walked away, *"Way to go! Good giving!!"* He offered her neither words of commendation or encouragement.

But He did tell the disciples that her giving was better than the giving of anyone else in the temple that day.

The woman who gave LEAST gave MOST (v. 43)

I imagine that the disciples were caught up in thinking that the really significant offerings on that day had been made by the wealthy. After all, so much more could be accomplished by a gift of gold and silver than by a couple of pieces of copper.

Jesus said, *"Nope..."*

[43] Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury"

Everything about this woman and her gift shouted "LESS!" Jesus saw her gift and said, "MORE!"

Clearly, He didn't mean that this woman gave more money than the others. Jesus could add.

She didn't give more money. But there are different ways of calculating value. Jesus wasn't calculating the value of her gift on the basis of how helpful it was to the operation of the temple.

The yardstick He used to measure the value of the offering was marked off in increments of sacrifice. And the benefit Jesus was concerned about was not the temple. It was the benefit to the woman that He has in mind.

Going back to an earlier point in our study this morning, the benefit was the woman's gain in every category that the scribes greedily got wrong.

- They demanded respect and admiration. She alone won the admiration of Jesus by her offering.
- They greedily gobbled up widow's houses for their own gain and *"will receive greater condemnation."* This widow, by giving away her bread money, will receive great reward.
- The scribes faked their piety with long pseudo-prayers, hoping to build reputations for godliness. She showed what a real heart for God looks like by means of the un-fake-able measure of the purse.

⁹ Another clear example would be Abraham's willingness to offer his son, Isaac, on an altar on Mount Moriah. It was that willingness to sacrifice that pleased God. (Genesis 22)

Conclusion:

So, did the widow's offering bring glory to God? Yes. Did it push God's purposes forward? Yes.

But here is what we cannot miss. Her offering was good for her.

Her offering wasn't sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice. It was sacrifice NOW for a greater good LATER. It wasn't altruism, doing what is right, because, darn it, it's the right thing to do.

Giving to God is always about sacrificing a lesser something (like material riches or comfort) NOW for something greater (God's kingdom advance; knowing the Lord; reward from God) LATER.

John Piper calls it "Christian hedonism." The Apostle Paul referred to it in terms of a rich harvest in the life to come. Jesus said when we give, serve, and love here and now we are laying up treasure in heaven.

And about Jesus...

He certainly gave Himself on the cross for our sins because He loves us. But there is more.

The author of the book of Hebrews tells us that when we consider the life that God wants us to live, we are to fix our eyes on Jesus, who, FOR THE JOY SET BEFORE HIM endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

In other words, one of the chief motivating factors for Jesus going to the cross was the joyous knowledge that when it was all over, His Father would richly reward Him with a crown and a throne and a Name that is above all names.

When you love and give and serve and give up creature comforts for His sake you are living faithfully. Literally.

You are believing that His Kingdom's advance is waaaay worth it. And you are taking God at His Word when He says that this life is not all there is, that He is good and that He knows how to reward those who seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)