

**The Scribes and the Widow:  
Mark 12:38-44**

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**Introduction:**

Whenever I am doing well at regular Bible reading, I am always impressed at how easily I may completely miss a major aspect of a passage because I had not truly read it in context. For instance, I have read and even preached from **Mark 12:41-44** multiple times. Of course, those lessons have always been in the context of our contribution. However, in our recent reading plan, I have finally seen that there is a slightly larger context to these verses than just the giving. Have you ever noticed that this story about the generous widow is right on the heels of Jesus rebuking the scribes for devouring widow's houses? I guess I had just always missed that. I can't believe this was mere coincidence for Mark as he wrote this gospel. While the story of the widow and her copper coins does teach us some great things about giving, the greater purpose of this story is to provide a contrast between the scribes and the widows whose houses they devour. Let us take a look at this passage with new eyes and ask ourselves which we more want to be like—the scribes or the widow.

**Discussion:**

- I. Me-centered vs. God-centered
  - A. When the scribes walked around in long robes, they were saying, "Look at me." When they expected greetings in the market place, they were saying, "Talk to me." When they searched out the chief seats at a banquet, they were saying, "Honor me." When they were offering long prayers, they were saying, "Listen to me." Do you see the trend here? Me, me, me, me, me. The scribes were me-centered. Their religion was all about themselves. Their apparent spirituality was all about themselves.
  - B. The widow, on the other hand, was God centered. Instead of thinking about herself, she was thinking about the Lord's house. Notice the extent of her giving. The text says that even out of her poverty, she gave all she had to live on. She was taking what little she had for rent and dinner, if you will, and giving it the work of the Lord. Who was she thinking about? Who was she centered on?
  - C. We need to be like this widow. Not that we need to give over every penny we earn to the church. Rather, that we need to be God centered. Jesus said the greatest command of all is to the love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind (**Mark 12:30**). We are to seek first His kingdom and righteousness (**Matthew 6:33**). We must be God centered in every aspect of our lives, not just what we do here when we come together.
- II. Selfish vs. Selfless
  - A. Because the scribes were so me-centered, they were also selfish. They were so selfish, they even devoured widows' houses. Who knows but maybe the very widow in our story had only two copper coins to live on because she had been oppressed by a scribe. I'm not sure we fully appreciate how bad this sin was to the Jews. Sure, we think it is bad to mistreat helpless, little old ladies. But according to the Old Covenant that was one of the worst, dirtiest, rottenest sins people could commit. According to **Exodus 22:22**, the Jews were not allowed to mistreat widows. In **Deuteronomy 27:19**, God pronounced a curse on anyone who was unjust to widows. In **Isaiah 10:1-3**, God lists how awful the people are and why He is going to punish them. Included on the list is despoiling widows. In **Jeremiah 7:6**, God said oppressing the widows was one of the reasons Israel was being judged. Further, it was linked with shedding innocent blood and going after other gods. In **Job 22:9**, when Eliphaz wanted to express how bad Job must have been to cause all his suffering, he figured Job must have sent away widows empty. And when Job was talking about his own situation in **Job 31:16, 22**, he said God should let his shoulder blade fall from his socket and let his arm be broken from its socket. Devouring widows' houses was the pinnacle of sin for these Jews. It was the epitome of selfishness and evil. This selfishness was made manifest by their greed. That was the scribes.
  - B. The widow, on the other hand, because she was God-centered, was selfless. Instead of drawing from everyone else to herself, she was giving of herself. She sacrificed of herself. She gave all she had to live on into the temple treasury. We may not recognize how impressive that is.

According to **Deuteronomy 14:28-29**, the widows were supposed to be supported by the tithes the people offered. I don't believe this temple treasury is the same as the tithe. But what I am impressed with is here was a woman that all the people around her had been commanded to take care of her. However, instead of demanding that care and becoming selfish. She is taking what she has and giving it to the work of the Lord. Think of the contrast. The scribes would devour widows' houses in order to line their own pockets, while this widow emptied her pockets to build the Lord's house.

- C. We must be selfless. As **Philippians 2:3-4** demonstrates, we must view others as more important. We must view their problems as more pressing. Their needs as more necessary. This is true in reference to any of our resources, whether we are talking about time, ability or money. However, we especially see this taught regarding our money. According to **I Timothy 6:17-19**, those who have money and material goods are supposed to share, not take more from others. Further, **Hebrews 13:16** says we must share what we have with others. That sharing is the kind of sacrifice with which God is pleased. Instead of selfishness manifested in greed, we need to have selflessness manifested in generous sacrifice.

### III. Outwardly focused vs. Inwardly focused

- A. The scribes were focused on the outside. They were focused on how they looked to others. They were not focused on what was really happening to them on the inside. They wore long robes because it made them appear more spiritual. They said long prayers because it made them sound more spiritual. They wanted greetings and chief seats because that demonstrated they had a good reputation and they looked good to others. On the inside, they were clearly rotten and evil. As we have already pointed out, they were filled with selfishness and greed. We all know how Jesus viewed the scribes based on **Matthew 23:25-28**. They were like cups washed on the outside but not the inside. They were like tombs and sepulchers that were washed white on the outside, but the inside was full of dead men's bones.
- B. The widow on the other hand was not for show. Think about this; who would ever drop only one cent in the treasury box as a means to attract attention to themselves about how wonderfully spiritual they were? I can imagine that she was quite embarrassed. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if she tried to hide and cover up what she was doing. But she had the right heart and that was what caused her to offer the right sacrifice.
- C. We need to focus on the inside. According to **Matthew 15:7-9**, God doesn't want lip service. He wants heart devotion. Further, if we want to be cleansed, we have to guard our hearts for from it flow the springs of life according to **Proverbs 4:23**. Back in **Matthew 15:10-20**, Jesus demonstrated that what is in the heart is what comes out in the actions and that is what defiles us. We need to work on our heart. If there is anything in our heart that is bad, we need to get that out in the open instead of letting it fester there. We need to worry less about our reputations and more about our righteousness. We need to worry less about our homeliness and more about our holiness. We need to worry less about our how we appear and more about what we are. Get the heart cleansed and the rest will follow.

### Conclusion:

No doubt there is a final contrast—the personal consequences. The scribes were rebuked by Jesus. The widow was honored. As we put the characteristics of the scribes behind us and pursue those of the widow, the Lord will bless and honor us. That may not be quite as apparent in this life. When we are done acting like the widow, we may still be penniless like the widow. But that honor will come when we stand before the judgment seat of God and He says, "Welcome good and faithful servant, enter the rest of your Lord."