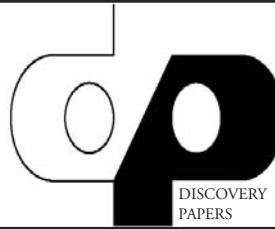


# GREATER THAN GREAT

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING  
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



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Mark 12:35-44  
38th Message  
Scott Grant  
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In 1984, Ed Burke, an old track-and-field athlete from Los Gatos, was chosen to carry the U.S. flag for the opening ceremonies of the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. For pride in country, he decided to hold the flag aloft with only one hand. “It’s the only way to do it—one hand, out in front, and raised as high as I could raise it,” he said. When he led the U.S. delegation into the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, he was overcome with emotion. “Then,” he said wryly, “I realized this flag was heavy.” There was more to carrying the flag than he thought there was.

At points in our spiritual journeys, we realize that there’s more to Jesus than we thought there was. There’s a weight to him that gives us pause. Jesus is greater than we think. If he’s greater than we think, perhaps at times we need to rethink the implications of the gospel for our lives. Mark 12:35-37 helps us do precisely that.

Having responded to opponents who approached him in the temple precincts, Jesus takes the initiative to teach a crowd that had gathered there. Appearances can be deceiving, the old saying goes, and it holds true in these stories.

## David’s Lord

Mark 12:35-37:

**And Jesus began to say, as He taught in the temple, “How is it that the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself said in the Holy Spirit,**

**‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD,**

**‘SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND,**

**UNTIL I PUT YOUR ENEMIES BENEATH YOUR FEET.’”**

**David himself calls Him ‘Lord’; so in what sense is He his son?” And the large crowd enjoyed listening to Him.<sup>1</sup>**

Based on the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jews anticipated the coming of one they called “the Christ,” their ultimate king. Because the Scriptures connected the Christ to David, Israel’s prototypical king, scribes and many others employed the title “Son of David” when referring to him (2 Samuel 7:12; Isaiah 9:2-7, 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Amos 9:11). Jesus understood himself to be the Son of David but preferred the title Son of Man, a less loaded title that allowed him both to invest it with his own meaning and to remain incognito for a time. Jesus, who didn’t resist the moniker when a blind beggar

and pilgrims hailed him as the Son of David, evidently understands it to be an appropriate—but ultimately inadequate—title (Mark 10:47-48, 11:10). Having defined himself as the Son of Man, he now rehabilitates the Son of David title while at the same time discrediting the scribes who have opposed him.

Jesus observes that David heard God speaking to the Christ. In a Spirit-inspired text, David recorded God’s words in Psalm 110:1 and hailed the Christ not as his son but as his Lord. According to David, God granted the Christ a throne next to God and promised to defeat the Christ’s enemies. The conclusion that presses upon Jesus’ listeners is that the Christ is superior to David. As the Christ, Jesus is fighting Israel’s battles for her, like David of old. However, he has to rehabilitate the Son of David title, because he’s fighting greater battles, not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of wickedness.

In appearance, the Christ is merely the Son of David. In reality, the Christ is greater than the Son of David.

The crowd, for the moment, at least, listens to Jesus with gladness.

## The greatness of Christ

The scribes, anticipating the coming of the Christ, entertained an inadequate conception of him. We, looking back at the coming of the Christ, have a better vantage point, but still, our conception of Christ is blurred, in part because we can’t wrap our minds around such greatness.

Three facets of Christ’s greatness help us form a correct conception of him. First, by Christ “all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible” (Colossians 2:16). Second, he “upholds all things by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). Third, through him all things, “whether things on earth or in heaven,” are being reconciled to God (Colossians 2:20). He is subjugating tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and the sword—that is, he is turning all evil to the advantage of good. Evil becomes the servant of Christ. Because of Christ, creation actually benefits from that which would have destroyed it (Romans 8:31-39).

Christ was involved in creating all things, he sustains all things, and he will be involved in restoring all things. Apart from him, nothing exists. Apart from him, all things would fly apart. Apart from him, Satan, sin, and death would corrupt all things forever. He’s the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In the end, though, language fails us, for trying to describe the greatness of Christ is like trying to play Mozart on a kazoo.

In appearance, greatness is all around us. In reality, it's nowhere to be seen except in Christ.

In verses 38-40, David's Lord turns from what the scribes say to what the scribes do.

## 'Beware of the scribes'

Mark 12:38-40:

**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, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."**

Jesus continues discrediting the scribes, who crave the respect of the people, by unmasking their hypocrisy. They wear festal robes as a matter of routine in order to be seen, they position themselves for respectful greetings, and they covet seats of honor. Literally, they want the "first" seats both in the synagogues, the places of worship, and at banquets. Jesus, on the other hand, said, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first," and "whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all" (Mark 10:31, 44).

Jesus charges the scribes with exploiting their reputations as religious experts in order to take advantage of widows, a particularly grievous offense according the Scriptures they deigned to interpret for the masses.<sup>2</sup> They also seek to impress others with—and hide behind—their long but insincere prayers.

Jesus warns the crowd that gladly listens to him: Don't follow the scribes, whose exploitative hypocrisy merits special condemnation. Their words can't be trusted, and their actions indicate that they can't be trusted. Instead, the crowd should trust Jesus, who is emerging as the Christ.

In appearance, the scribes are experts in the law who deserve respect. In reality, they are exploitative hypocrites unworthy of trust.

## The perils of celebrity

Don't lean too heavily on spiritual leaders. The best of them have feet of clay. The worst of them are megalomaniacs. In between are the hypocrites. Be especially wary of those who covet the spotlight, who revel in being honored, who exploit their reputations to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of others.

Something in our fallen human nature wants a flesh-and-blood leader, other than our flesh-and-blood Savior, to exalt. Our celebrity-obsessed culture plays right into this. Many of us want our spiritual leaders to be celebrities, men and women of acclaim and accomplishment, who tell us what to do, so that we don't have to think for ourselves, and who give us hope that we can somehow brush the success—emotional health, achievement, fame—that

they've conjured.

All spiritual leaders have serious flaws, but we don't know most of them well enough to know what they are. Furthermore, many spiritual leaders feel enormous pressure to keep up the charade and present themselves as compelling illustrations of what their followers can have if they just believe and do the right things. Therefore, such leaders often bury their fears and insecurities, their jealousy and lust. In other words, such leaders are like scribes who walk around in long robes. Psychologist Larry Crabb writes, "Much of the modern church continues on in a parasitic relationship between leaders who deny the reality of their own lives and followers who are sustained by the false hope of a trouble-free life."<sup>3</sup> Ouch! All of us have our issues, but we like to think there are people out there who don't have any issues and who therefore make us believe that maybe we can get over ours.

Ray Stedman, the first pastor of our church, said in a sermon toward the end of his pastorate:

*Thirty-five years ago this year I came as a pastor to Peninsula Bible Church. I didn't realize it at the time, but, looking back now, I must confess that I was motivated more by personal ambition than any other thing. I thought I was dedicated to the work of the Lord, and to some degree I was. But, on reflection, I can see how much of it came from an urge to be a well-known pastor, to make a name as a Christian leader, to see an effective ministry begin with a great congregation. Through these thirty-five years, through much pain and struggle, those dreams have been fulfilled. But I want to tell you this: They do not mean very much to me right now! As I look back, what means more to me are the hundreds of lives that have been changed as people heard the Word of truth, right where you are sitting now. . . . I want to tell you that is not my work, nor is it the work of anybody associated with us here, loyal and helpful as they have been. That is the work of Jesus, his mighty work, conducted from the throne of power at the right hand of the Majesty on high, carried out through the Spirit by means of willing men and women who saw themselves in the same relationship to him as he is to the Father: "You in me and I in you."<sup>4</sup>*

I must confess that personal ambition dogs me as well. I do battle with it every day. Something within me wants the acclaim of the celebrity preachers I just warned you about. So aren't I the hypocrite? Except that I just told you about it, which makes me less of one, I suppose.

Take heed, says Jesus. Take heed, says the psalmist: "Do not trust in princes, / In mortal man, in whom there is no salvation" (Psalm 146:3). Instead, put your trust in the King of Kings.

The apostle Paul admonished the star-struck Corinthians to regard their leaders, including himself—an apostle of Christ, no less—simply as lowly "servants of Christ" and "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1). Servants and stewards equip the saints to trust in Christ and follow him, not themselves (Ephesians 4:11-12). At

our church, one of the tasks that we set for ourselves as pastors is to help our people understand the Scriptures for themselves—to make them dependent on Christ, not us. At best, we're guides who lead others to Christ.

In appearance, spiritual leaders are worthy of trust. In reality, they aren't worthy of too much trust.

Jesus, after teaching the crowd in the temple precincts, sits down in Mark 12:41-44, gathers his disciples, and makes some observations.

## A widow's offering

Mark 12:41-44:

**And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. 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; for 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."**

Earlier, when Jesus looked around the temple precincts, he didn't like what he saw. He later returned to drive out the buyers and sellers and overturn the tables of the moneychangers (Mark 11:11, 15-16). Now, he observes worshipers making contributions to the ministry of the temple. Trumpet-shaped receptacles were affixed to the treasury to receive both the temple tax that was required of men and the freewill offerings of anyone. Wealthy people are making large contributions, in contrast to a widow who contributes two coins that together amounted only to the smallest denomination in Roman coinage.

Jesus gathers his disciples to share with him his observations concerning the scene at the treasury. He singles out the widow for special commendation. Others gave more, but they drew from surplus supplies. The widow, on the other hand, had no surplus to draw from and still gave all she owned. Literally, she gave "out of her need." If she had only two coins and wanted to make a freewill offering, she could have held one coin back. Instead, she parted with both coins. Quantitatively, the rich people gave more than the widow. Qualitatively, the widow gave more than anyone else, including the rich people.

Pollster George Gallup Jr. makes a similar observation about contemporary giving patterns, noting that "the poor give a larger proportion of their income to charity than the rich. Being surrounded by misery, they see opportunities to help on every side. The rich, especially now, with the widening gap between rich and poor, have a tendency to cordon themselves off and therefore don't see much of the grimness of life."<sup>5</sup>

Earlier, the disciples were shocked when Jesus told them that the entrance of the wealthy into the kingdom of God was especially problematic. They considered wealth a sign

of God's favor (Mark 10:23-27). Once again, Jesus turns conventional values upside down. What's more is less; what's less is more.

The widow exemplifies obedience to the command to love the Lord literally with one's "whole" heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). Jesus notes that her contribution literally amounted to her "whole life." The scribe whom Jesus commended observed that obedience to the greatest commandments literally amounted to "much more than whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mark 12:33). Whole burnt offerings, which represent the offering of oneself to God, are irrelevant when one, in actuality, offers up her whole life to God. Jesus came to "give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Earlier, he told a crowd that "whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35). It may look to some as if she's throwing away her "whole life," but Jesus sees in her the kind of surrender that the gospel calls for. She gives her whole life; she loses her whole life. We expect her, based on Jesus' commendation, to save her life. In the previous passage, we met a scribe who knew the law. In this passage, we meet a widow who lives it.

The widow not only stands out against the rich people, she also stands out against the hypocritical scribes. She gives all without drawing attention to herself, whereas the scribes put on religious airs and exploit those underneath them. The scribes' offense is particularly grievous in that they prey on widows, one of whom comes in for special commendation.

In appearance, many wealthy people made the greater contributions. In reality, a poor widow gave more than anyone else.

## Giving until it hurts

We tend to compartmentalize our lives. We welcome God's involvement with certain areas but cordon off other areas for our own use. Consider our attitude toward money. We devote a certain percentage of our resources to God and hold back a certain percentage for ourselves. God has his claims, and we have ours. No wonder we feel depleted, as if there's never enough money. The widow, on the other hand, offered her whole life to God, holding nothing back. She inspires us to blow up our compartments and surrender our whole lives, including all our money, to God.

Practically, this will mean, at least occasionally, giving what we at first don't want to give. When we give in this way, we will feel as if we're giving too much and risking too much, as if we're depleting our nest egg and eliminating our margin.

Why should we consider giving until it hurts?

First, because the gospel is worth it. The King of Kings is worth it: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for Your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich"—not materially rich, of course, but spiritually rich

(2 Corinthians 8:9).

Second, we should consider giving until it hurts because God promises to meet our needs. Paul told the Philippians, who contributed “beyond their ability” to the work of the gospel, “And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (2 Corinthians 8:4, Philippians 4:19). Furthermore, with these words he encouraged the Corinthians to contribute to the gospel: “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed” (2 Corinthians 9:8). Such promises, of course, have been abused by charlatans, which is a good reason to beware of charlatans but a bad reason to back away from the Scriptures.

Giving your whole life to the Lord will mean giving of your money in uncomfortable ways. Perhaps the time to give more, then, is when you feel least comfortable about giving more; when you feel as if you’re giving out of your need, not out of your surplus; when you most feel like holding something back.

Consider the current time. We’re in a recession. Have your financial prospects dimmed? Have your investments taken a hit? Perhaps it’s a perfect time to give more of our finances and trust the Lord. Defy the recession; trust the Lord.

Representatives of Operation Mobilization in India, who coordinated our church’s recent mission trip there, were shocked that we sent as many as thirty people. The organization regularly partners with teams from the West, but it had never hosted a team that large. The president of OM South India wondered aloud, “Isn’t America undergoing a recession?” I guess we defied the recession and trusted the Lord.

A church I visited several years ago in a barrio of Ensenada, Mexico, took its offering by allowing congregants to get up from their seats, walk over to a plate, and drop their contributions into it. It took only a minute or two for everyone to make his contribution—except for one man who was well into his eighties. By the time the rest of us had finished making our offerings, he had just managed to get up from his seat. With great determination, he hobbled and shuffled over to the plate and dropped in a few coins. Then he hobbled and shuffled back to his seat. The whole operation took about ten minutes. I found out later that he often got a ride to church, but on days that he didn’t, he walked. On such days, it took him several hours just to get to church. Nothing was going to keep that old man from getting to church—or from making his offering. When I saw him make his offering, I thought of the poor widow. When I think of both of them, I think that perhaps I should consider giving more to the work of the gospel.

If you give liberally of your money to the work of the gospel, some around you, often family members who are concerned for financial security, will worry that you’re

throwing your life away. In reality, according to Jesus, you’re saving your life. You’re saving yourself not least from constantly fretting about things that in the end don’t matter and don’t last, like money. In appearance, if you give your life to God, you’re throwing your life away. In reality, you’re saving your life.

## He stoops

Christ was involved in creating all things, he sustains all things, and he will be involved in restoring all things. One more thing: David says of God, in Psalm 18:35, “You give me your shield of victory, / and your right hand sustains me; / you stoop down to make me great” (Psalm 18:35, NIV). God’s willingness to stoop down to make us great—to make us what we’re supposed to be, what we deep down want to be, to make us truly human—is best understood in the incarnation. Christ, though he was rich, became poor so that we through his poverty might become rich. The greatness of Christ is most profoundly understood in his willingness to stoop to make us great. Because the Son of God emptied himself, therefore, we can say with David, “I can leap over a wall,” and with Paul, “But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Psalm 18:29, Romans 8:35). Christ is greater than great: he stoops to make us great.

The greatness of Christ dictates that we trust in him, not so much in spiritual leaders, and that we give to the work of the gospel until it hurts.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A As he taught in the temple ... (35a)  
B Appearance: Scribes say Christ is the son of David (35b)  
C Reality: Christ “greater” than son of David (36-37)  
A’ In his teaching ... (38a)  
B’ Appearance: Scribes’ preferences (38b-39)  
C’ Reality: They devour widows’ houses; “greater” condemnation (40)  
A’’ He sat down opposite treasury and began observing ... (41a)  
B’’ Appearance: Rich people put in more than widow (41b-42)  
C’’ Reality: Widow put in more, (literally) as “great” as she had (43-44)
- <sup>2</sup> Mark doesn’t specify the nature of the scribes’ offense. In that they “devour widows’ houses,” they may have been exploiting the hospitality of widows.
- <sup>3</sup> Larry Crabb, “If I Could Direct the Wind,” *Mars Hill Review* (Premier Issue, 1994), 18-19.
- <sup>4</sup> Ray Stedman, “The Cure for Heart Trouble” (Palo Alto, Calif.: Discovery Publishing, [www.pbc.org/messages/4301](http://www.pbc.org/messages/4301), March

17. 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 28.

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