

**To Those Newly Elected or Appointed**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

**Mark 12:38--44 (NRSV)**

<sup>38</sup>As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

<sup>41</sup>He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup>For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

**Sermon:**

Thankfully, the elections are over, except in those states with contested races. Now these elected folks should settle in and look out for their constituents' interest within the greater interest of the nation.

As I have shared on several occasions, in the Ancient Near East of Jesus' day, the idea that politics, religion, economics, family and/or tribe were separate and distinct areas of one's life would have been nonsensical. Life, with all its day-to-day details, was an integrated whole. After the European Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, artificial boundaries between such areas in life became the norms in many people's thinking. Therefore, I believe if a person wants to hear a message about personal salvation or citizenship in the kingdom of God in the New Testament, they must realize it lies within the greater context of people's political, economic, religious, and familial relationships, wherein people anticipated the new order of things in the coming Kingdom of God.

Since Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, the heart of institutional Judaism of his day, and has begun to teach in the center of its power, the Temple, he has been buttonholed by some Pharisees and agents of the Roman puppet Herodian monarchy, who tried to trap him about paying taxes to Rome. A group of Sadducees challenge him on the resurrection of the dead, hoping to trip him up and reveal him and his position on the matter as foolishness in the eyes of his followers. Finally, one scribe, ostensibly a true seeker, publicly confronts him with a question about the greatest law. This challenge seems to end well for Jesus and the scribe. However, at the heart of each challenge is the issue of Jesus' authority to teach as he does.

Let me point out that scribes in Israel after the Babylonian Exile became more than just professional copyists, scriveners of legal documents, notary publics, or court clerks. Some scribes, in effect, became the interpreters and teachers of the Mosaic Laws as sort of religious lawyers, whose interpretations of the Laws of Moses affected every aspect of people's lives.

Also, the regions of Galilee, Judea, Perea, and Samaria, which made up the traditional holy lands, although under Roman dominance, their day-to-day administration was, as a rule, carried out by indigenous people. And, given that there was little to no distinctions between religion, politics, economics, etc., those whom we would call religious leaders, priests, et al would have in general been civil leaders.

In the days just prior to his crucifixion, Jesus cautions the people, <sup>38-40</sup> ..."*Watch out for the religion scholars. [I interject, not all scholars, just those who] love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the*

*head table at every church function [or center stage at public ceremonies]. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless.”* (The Message, Mark 12;38-40)

These passages would have also served as a warning for Mark’s church, which would have most likely been a part of a synagogue community but well on its way to having its own formal institutional structure with a hierarchical leadership of its own. And, it goes without saying, that it is a warning to our church and society about elitism, hypocrisy, and corruption among our leaders, be they religious or civil, given that at the heart of their election or appointment is supposed to be the well-being of the people and society in general.

I remind us that the followers of Jesus and many in Mark’s audience were from the poorer strata of society as well as from a minority community of Diaspora Jews. Such folks would have in general accepted their place in the scheme of things without too much complaint. I say this because a people’s place in the scheme of reality was understood to be decreed by God or the gods. However, they did balk and mumble about their religious-civil leaders making an already bad situation worse. Therefore, Jesus’ kingdom message would have resonated with the people’s discontent and victimization. In fact, this victimization could have been seen as God’s motivation for Jesus’ ministry not unlike God having seen the people’s plight and hearing their complaints in Egypt and sending Moses to deliver and lead them into the Promised Land as God sent Jesus to lead them into the kingdom of God.

Therefore, when Jesus speaks and demonstrates that he has a charismatic relationship with God, the people hear Jesus with real hope because he does not use the quibbling and laborious disputations of academia, the wishy-washy legalese of lawyers and politicians. Jesus looks the people square in the eyes and gives them real hope in this world and the one to come, which, incidentally, would have been understood as this world renewed and ruled by God’s righteous will and ways. Jesus tells people that God’s kingdom is already here to a significant degree in his teachings and his community of followers, his surrogate family.

I hasten to point out that in the scriptures today, Jesus is not anti-academic, anti-scholarship, anti-government, or anti-rich, but he is anti-exploitation and anti-misrepresentation of God’s will and ways, whether by design or people’s unwillingness to be open to divine revelation.

As Jesus is teaching in the Temple, he sees a widow in line along with others as they give either their mandated financial support or tithes for the maintenance and operations of the Temple or voluntary gifts for special temple related interests and purposes. How did Jesus know this woman was a widow? If this woman had had a son or a husband, she wouldn’t be there paying her tithe. Having no husband, son, or male near kin to pay her tithe, she would have fallen into the social category of being poor; that is, without derivative honor standing, regardless of how much money she may have had. However, given the amount of her tithe, two mites, she would have been financially poor as well.

As a point of interest, this scene takes place in the Court of the Women where the Temple Treasury was located. The Court of the Women was not a place for women only, but just as far as women could go into the temple except for very special occasions. Located in and around the treasury would have been thirteen wooden boxes with brass funnel shaped openings coming up and out of them. The funnel shaped receivers were designed to let money go in but not allow a person’s hand to reach in and take money out.

Nine of these boxes were for mandated offerings and the remaining four for various voluntary offerings.<sup>1</sup> When coins were tossed into the brass funnel receivers, they would make a

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ*, electronic ed. (Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000). <https://ferrelljenkins.wordpress.com/2009/05/26/jesus-spoke-in-the-treasury-of-the-temple/> November 5, 2015

noise. The more money, the bigger or heavier the coins, the greater the noise, the smaller the coins the less noise they would make.

The widow, faithful to her understandings of God's claim on her resources as legislated by the scribes and priests, throws into one of the brass receiving horns her portion - two mites, about a farthing or a quarter of our penny. Seeing this, Jesus calls his disciples closer for a teaching moment.

I want us to look very, very closely at these passages as Jesus comments on the widow's offering or tithe. Contrary to what some may think in Mark's Gospel, Jesus does not praise or commend the widow's contribution as an act of voluntary, sacrificial giving, but rather praises her for her faithful commitment to God as she has been told and taught. So, let's resist the temptation to turn these passages into a stewardship moment.

Jesus, as he watches this widow, I can image, was very, very sad. In keeping with prior indictments of many aspects of his Judaism, which he saw institutionally as having lost a sense of its true mission, Jesus is probably lamenting the fact that God's temple and its administrators have become so corrupt and out of touch that they demand poor widows pay taxes, even down to so measly an amount as two mites.

Widows were people who may have already been victimized by circumstances beyond their control without the government-religion taking its bite. The point I am making is that the temple, the priests, and the scribes ought to be giving to her, taking care of her, and relieving her situation, not serving their own interests at her expense. Thus, we should read and hear these passages as Jesus' indictment of calloused and indifferent leaders of governments and religions. I say governments and religion only for our benefit because, as I said earlier, for the ancients this would have been a false distinction.

There is a good reason for Jesus to highlight the widow's giving. You see, widows did not always fare well in the Ancient Near East. However, orphans and widows were of a special concern to Israel's God as they should have been for its religious-civil leaders. In addition, the root of the term for widow in Hebrew is "one who is unable to speak." A widow without a son or male near kin is a person who had no voice or anyone to speak for her or represent her in the affairs of life and community. Therefore, God was the "Father of the fatherless", and the voice of the widow in and through God's priests and leaders of the people.

The scribes as religious-civil lawyers would have interpreted the laws of inheritance as it related to widows and often acted as what we would call probate lawyers for a fee, sometimes an exorbitant fee. I also want to remind us that in Chapter 7, Jesus condemns the scribes, who made religious, legal commitments or vows to donate resources to the Temple that could and should have been used to take care of their aged parents.

In general, Jesus is making the point that the scribes are abusing their positions as teaching-lawyers to the detriment of society's most vulnerable - the widows and orphans. They do this all the while parading around for all to see, wearing distinctive, expensive robes or stoles, basking in places of honor in the synagogues and at public gatherings. In so doing, the scribes profane the laws and worship of God.

Wouldn't it have been wonderful if one of the scribes had come over to the widow and quietly said to her just before she dropped her paltry coins in the tube, "Mother, mother, withhold your giving today, buy food for yourself, it is enough for God that your heart is in the right place." On the other hand, maybe one of the scribes could have slipped her a ten or twenty saying, "Sister, God has honored your giving as I now honor your example." But neither they, Jesus, or his disciples did this, did they? However, the point Jesus makes here is not about charity but religious-political legislation, institutions, and their leadership victimizing people.

Jesus says that God's judgment upon those religious leaders and in our day our religious and civil leaders, who have the power and authority to govern, regulate, and tax fairly and equitably but instead seek their or their institution's well-being over the good of the people, will reap a greater measure of God's justice one day.

I think we are safe in seeing Mark recalling this story of the widow's victimization as an analogue to Jesus' own victimization. Both Jesus and the widow are victims of corrupt, duplicitous religious-political leaders, whose hearts and minds were closed to divine correction in the teachings of Jesus and to the possibilities of God doing anything new and powerful in their lives or the life of their institution.

Later, Jesus' crucifixion, an example of ultimate victimization and injustice, will leap on to the scene of human history as a decisive moment of hope for divine justice in the kingdom yet to come. Until that day, the truths of compassion and righteousness that Jesus taught, lived, and died for still live on, transforming human lives and blessing people like us as kingdom citizens long after the Temple has been plowed under and its leadership is no more.

Who would have thought, I know the widow wouldn't have, that one day her paltry two mites would become mighty symbols that accuse, judge, and condemn those in governments and religions around the world, who corrupt their calling as stewards of God's creatures, creations, and people. Therefore, let us not think about the widow's paltry coins, which she was legally required to give and gave, as symbols of sacrifice, but rather as her devotion to God even when wrongly legislated. Also, let us think about how Jesus turned those two little coins into symbols that cry out across the years for righteousness, compassion, and a true relationship to God measured in part by a people's support and concern for the truly helpless and victimized among them.

As the widow leaves, the last tinkling of her little coins having faded, this nameless woman trudges back to her socially imposed plight in life, knowing she has done her part. However, she pauses, turns, and looks back. What accusations or pleas for justice and compassion do we see in her eye's senators, congressional representatives, presidents, governors, mayors, bishops, cardinals, popes, priests, pastors, and disciples? Remember, you so elected and appointed, as you parade around and receive social and professional accolades, you are supposed to look out for those people, who are true victims, whether of others, society, or nature, and if you do not, you should stand in fear of the judgment that awaits you.

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