



Mark 12:38–40

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Reflection

In a handful of days Jesus will be betrayed by one of his closest friends into the hands of the chief priests and the teachers of law and a contingent of the temple guards consisting of Roman soldiers carrying swords and clubs. Under the cover of darkness and in a secluded location outside of the city they will arrest him, and subject him to a hurried midnight trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin, then a pre-dawn hearing before the Romans. Jesus will be struck across the face, mocked, insulted, beaten and then nailed naked to a Roman cross, all by 9am the next morning.

There can be no doubt who originated the removal of Jesus Christ. There can be

no doubt as to who set off this chain of events. The chief priests and teachers of the law who bribed Judas and then accompanied the temple guard to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane were goaded into it by Jesus himself.

Listen to him again today, right in the middle of the temple courts, just days before his execution, Mark 12:38–40,

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In the week leading up to his death preaching and teaching in the temple courts in Jerusalem Jesus publicly insults, humiliates, out wits and then excoriates the Pharisees and their disciples, members of the leading Jewish families known as the 'elders', the chief priests, the Herodians, the Sadducees and today the teachers of the law, also known as the scribes.

The scribes were biblical scholars, experts in the Old Testament law, living in a time when religion, culture and national identity were completely overlaid. This made scribes highly esteemed, but they had grown to love the stage and the trappings of their position far too much. They

had taken to wearing a white linen robe with a long white fringe that reached to their feet – religious swans regally gliding amongst the common people. Jeremiah, the great New Testament authority says in one of his books that all the people would rise respectfully when a scribe passed by, and that only tradesmen busy at work were exempt. They were greeted reverently as ‘Rabbi’ which means ‘my great one’ or as ‘Master’ or as ‘Father’. They were also given the places of honour at banquets and in the synagogues. Teachers of the law were honoured above the aged, even above their own parents. It is to these proud peacocks interspersed amongst the crowds that Jesus now turns. He doesn’t address them directly, he’s speaking to his disciples, but Jesus speaks loudly enough so that the great

crowds make no mistake about what he is saying. Our passage again,

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Jesus levels five charges at the teachers of the law. Firstly, they parade about in special dress advertising their status and wealth. Secondly, they relish public approval, public acclaim, the praise of men.

Thirdly, they're the ones to push and shove and ensure that they receive the places of honour at banquets and in religious settings. Fourthly, their long prayers are for show, a cover-up for greedy hearts. And finally, even worse than this, their wealth and status derive from oppressive impoverished widows, the ones God has entrusted to them for special care.

I don't know if you've noticed, but people tend to react most strongly in an argument when there is a kernel of truth in the allegation. Here, Jesus publicly pulls back the curtain and exposes the wickedness of some of Judaism's most esteemed leaders. I can only imagine their anger, these men who care so much for appearances, at being publicly exposed like this – the clenched fists, the red faces

flushed with rage, murderous glares. With words like these, prophetic words very similar to those uttered by the prophets of old in condemnation of similarly corrupt leaders of God's people in the past; with words like these, Jesus seals his fate. In a matter of days these very same teachers of the law along with the chief priests will lead the temple guard to arrest Jesus – to shut him up, to stop him exposing their sin, out of jealousy and fear that he might rock the boat too much and they might lose the trappings of their positions, their power and their source of wealth.

Why is Jesus so severe you might ask? To bring on his death certainly. But there is even more going on here than this. Jesus, the Son of God, is furious at the hypocrisy and wickedness of these so-called ex-

perts in God's word. And so, after publicly exposing their hearts he ends with these foreboding, prophetic words:

These men will be punished most severely.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, a foundational statement of faith for the Presbyterian Church, is a series of short questions and answers about the Christian faith. Question 150 reads:

Are all transgressions of the law of God equally heinous in themselves, and in the sight of God?

The answer is no. Some sins will be judged more harshly by God, especially, the catechism says, sins committed by people 'if

they be of riper age, greater experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others.'

Sins in mature Christians and Christian leaders will be judged more harshly than in others. 'These men will be punished most severely', says Jesus. His brother James, a later leader in Jerusalem, puts it this way in James 3:1,

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Just as Jesus has earlier taught us in Luke 12:48,

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

Think & Pray

These are sobering words to those of us who've been Christians for some time, and whom God has seen fit to give positions of leadership in the church. And so instead of looking down on the teachers of the law, the wise person weighs Jesus' charges against them against their own heart.

Let's do that now and repent of our sins as we have need. Consider those five charges: parading around advertising your

status and wealth; craving the approval of your peers; claiming the places of honour; public prayers and behaviour concealing private sin like greed, materialism and worldliness; and not caring for the most vulnerable in your midst. Do you love the stage a little too much? Do you advertise your status and wealth, secretly desiring the praise and approval of others more than the approval of God? Is there hypocrisy in your life when comes to the faith that you profess on Sunday and what you do with the remainder of your week? Do you think often of the widow, the orphan, the refugee? Do you do more than simply think of them, when it comes to your money and your time? If we're honest with ourselves I'm sure we all have things to repent of as we work through this list.

Spend some time doing just that now. Get them off your chest. Ask God to expose them and remove them so you can love and serve him better. And make sure you remember that after levelling these charges against the teachers of the law and us Jesus went to do something about them on the cross. If your trust is in him, you're utterly and completely forgiven, and by the power of his Spirit, you are able to free yourself of these sins forever.