

Series: Mark
Title: A Pure Faith
Text: Mark 12:35-40
Date: April 11, 2021

Verse 35

Mark 12:35 continued the narrative surrounding Jesus' interaction with the religious leaders during the holy week. Mark said, "While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he asked, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?'" (Mark 12:35). Jesus used an interrogative in addressing his adversaries, employing the common method for rabbinical debate in His day. He used the same tactic back in Mark 11:29-30. In using it in verse 35, Jesus turned the tables on His adversaries. Though He had been previously interrogated by His opponents (Mark 11:27-28; 12:13-14; 12:18-19), He now embraced the position of interrogator. He became the one who asked questions. His act demonstrated that He was the one who had all authority in matters related to religion and faith. Though the chief priests, scribes, and elders promoted themselves as the source of religious dogma, Jesus Himself was the Son of God who was the embodiment of all truth (John 1:1 and 14:6).

Mark did not reveal to whom Jesus' question was directed. Matthew's gospel indicates it was aimed at the Pharisees (Matthew 22:41).¹ The scribes were the professional teachers of the Law in Jesus' day. Most of them were Pharisees.² Jesus' question in our verse centered on the scribes understanding of the Messiah. They were known for referring to Him as "the Son of David." They believed the Anointed One would come from the lineage of David. Most Jews in Jesus' day held to the same belief, or a similar version of it. Such an understanding of the Messiah's origin was based on teaching of the Old Testament. The Davidic covenant was established in 2 Samuel 7:11–16. The Psalms (Psalm 18:50 and 89; 89:35-37), Prophets (Isaiah 9:6-7), and Minor Prophets (Hosea 3:5) affirmed the Messiah would come from the lineage of David.³ In John's gospel, we see evidence of the widespread acceptance of the tradition concerning these matters in Jesus' day. John gave an account in which the scribes confessed that the Messiah would come from David's offspring (John 7:42).

In our current text, Jesus rebuked the scribes for an incomplete understanding of God's promises to David. Though they knew the Messiah would be the Son of David, they did not see from Scripture that He would also be the Son of God.⁴ Our passage seems to indicate that the Scribes did not respond to Jesus' question. Perhaps they responded in silence and stood staring at Him.

From reading our text, it seems our Lord took His opponent's silence as an opportunity to instruct them from God's Word. Verses 36-37 contain the content of His teaching. If you remember from earlier in our study, Jesus had previously been teaching His disciples in Mark 11:20-25. His instruction was interrupted by religious leaders who wanted to challenge Him (Mark 11:27). In our current passage, Jesus finally had the opportunity to return to His teaching.

¹ Brooks, 200.

² Robertson, 370.

³ Brooks, 199-200.

⁴ Robertson, 370.

Verse 36

To correct His opponents, Jesus referenced a passage from the Psalms in verse 36. He said, “David himself says by the Holy Spirit: The Lord declared to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet’” (Mark 12:36). Jesus knew His opponents held to a high view of Scripture; so, He used Scripture against them. He used a similar tactic with the Sadducees back in Mark 12:26.

In referencing the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus demonstrated that those Scriptures prophesied regarding his ministry. He also intended to expose the ignorance of his adversaries. Though they realized the Messiah would come from David’s lineage, they mistakenly looked for a warlike political leader. They wanted a man of blood like David. The religious leaders overlooked the way in which the Scriptures foretold of Jesus’ coming as both the Son of Man and Son of God. They were blinded to the fact that He would first come to suffer and die for sins.⁵ They failed to see Christ’s full presence in the Law and the Prophets.

Christians today should be on guard against the folly of the first-century religious leaders. To this day, there are many who are unable to discern the presence of Christ in the Old Testament. Christianity is a religion of two covenants. To be grounded in God’s truth, believers must understand Christ through the lens of both. The modern movement that undermines the importance of the Old Testament is injurious to the faith. Jesus Himself advocated for an understanding of both Testaments. In John’s Gospel, He spoke of the way in which the Jewish Scriptures testified about Him, saying “You pore over the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, and yet they testify about me” (John 5:39). No Christian should ever be guilty of despising or minimizing the Old Testament. Mature and reasonable believers place proper value on both of the Lord’s covenants.⁶

To contradict His adversaries in our current passage, Jesus cited a well beloved Psalm — Psalm 110. It was a messianic Psalm that foretold of Christ’s ministry. Jesus knew His opponents would regard the song as Holy Writ, so He used it against them. Their problem was that they believed the Messiah would be a mere man. They didn’t believe in the hypostatic union. Jesus wanted them to see that, according to Psalm 110:1, the Messiah was expected to be both man and God.

In the Hebrew of the passage, the first reference to “Lord” contains the word typically rendered “Yahweh.” The second mention of “Lord” contained the word commonly translated “Adonai.” The second term was often used of earthly monarchs and kings.⁷ The intent of the song was to depict God as addressing an earthly ruler. One has said the original Hebrew could be rendered “God said to my superior.”⁸

Verse 37

In verse 37, Jesus gave the application of Psalm 110:1 to His hearers, saying, “David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How, then, can he be his son?” (Mark 12:37). The language of Psalm 110:1 was purposely strange. It depicted David as referring to one of His offspring as “Lord.” Why would David, the King of Israel and Judah, regard anyone of His lineage as being his master?

⁵ Brooks, 200-201.

⁶ Ryle, 210.

⁷ Brooks, 200.

⁸ Brooks, 200.

The answer lies in the Deity of Christ. David called his descendent his Lord because he knew his descendent would be God.

The Psalm was meant to portray the mysterious and miraculous nature of the incarnation. The Messiah was both man and God, one hundred percent human and one hundred percent divine. The scribes, chief priests, Pharisees, and elders did not grasp such realities. Jesus exposed their ignorance of Messianic truth with His citation of Psalm 110:1.

In referencing the Psalm, Jesus also intended to claim Messiahship for Himself. He was from the lineage of David. The religious leaders could have easily verified His birth lineage, if they would have checked. In the first century, accurate genealogical records were kept safely and stored in a way that made ancestral verification rather simple. It is for this reason Paul could boldly refer to Jesus as “our Lord, who was a descendant of David, according to the flesh” in Romans 1:3. The gospel records provide genealogies that prove Jesus’ Messianic heritage in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-31.⁹ Jesus’ opponents could not deny His birthright to the throne of David.

Though the Pharisees likely bristled up at Jesus’ teaching, Mark said “the large crowd was listening to him with delight” (Mark 12:37). From the beginning of Mark’s gospel, common people have been depicted as greatly enjoying Jesus’ teaching. One can imagine that Jesus’ teaching was a breath of fresh air because of the way in which it was delivered. Our Lord’s methods of instruction differed from that of the religious leaders, because He taught as one with “authority” (Mark 1:27). The religious leaders of the day were known for basing their teachings on the traditions of the elders. Jesus was different in that He spoke directly from God’s Word. The common folk in our passage were likely refreshed by a teacher who spoke clearly and directly from Scripture.

Common people also took great delight in Jesus’ teaching because of the way in which it rebuked the religious elite. They loved seeing the stuffy scribes put in their place.¹⁰ They had great disdain for the wealthy, self-righteous religious elite. They were accustomed to living under heavy pressure (Matthew 23:4) of their ridiculous ritualistic regulations and requirements. Jesus was different than the establishment. He didn’t put heavy burdens on people. He gave them what they needed — real truth from God. He exposed the self-serving religious leaders for the hypocrites they were.

The general populace also loved Jesus’ teaching because of the way in which it brought freedom. Their response reminds us of the liberating nature of Christian doctrine. Of His preaching, Jesus said, “Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30). Those words from Matthew’s gospel were spoken in regard to the harsh bondage brought about by the doctrine of the Pharisees. While it loaded people up with harsh burdens and unrealistic expectations, Jesus’ teaching brought liberty. All of this was a fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-3.

A lesson is found here for us. When people hear Christ’s doctrine, they have an opportunity to experience “delight.” May we be on guard against man-centered religion. Legalism never brings the life of God. Our Lord’s principles and precepts alone bring true redemption and release. All who have the opportunity to hear Him should listen with eagerness.

Verse 38

In verse 38, Jesus finally returned to His teaching that had been interrupted back in Mark 10:27. He said, “Beware of the scribes, who want to go around in long robes and who want greetings in

⁹ Ferguson, 204.

¹⁰ Brooks, 201.

the marketplaces” (Mark 12:38). Throughout the New Testament, the word translated “beware” is used by both Jesus (Mark 4:24, 8:15, 13:5, 13:23; Luke 8:18, 21:8) and the apostles (1 Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 5:15; Philippians 3:2; Colossians 2:8, 4:17; Hebrews 3:12; 2 John 8) to speak of the need for spiritual vigilance. In our current text, it was used in reference to the need to stand on guard against the hollow religion of the scribes.

Jesus had previously warned about the danger of the Pharisees’ doctrines (Mark 8:15). Mark placed Jesus’ warning in a strategic location within his gospel. After documenting how some tried to ensnare Jesus (Mark 11:27-28; 12:13-14; 12:18-19), he reminded his readers of the danger of false teaching.¹¹ He knew many needed to hear Jesus’ warning. By the time his gospel began to circulate, there were probably numerous heresies affecting churches. Mark wanted disciples to be on guard against spiritual error.¹²

The scene must have been tense as Jesus launched into the teaching of verse 38. Matthew’s gospel indicates the Pharisees were present to hear Jesus’ denunciation (Matthew 22:41). Jesus’ scathing denunciation was delivered in an “in your face” fashion,” and it contained stinging rebukes. Matthew gave the full transcript of the message (Matthew 23:1-39). Jesus did not mince words. It is unlikely that modern religious people would tolerate Jesus’ preaching. Most would consider His style too rough and mean. One Greek scholar has said Jesus’ sermon had the effect of blistering its hearers.¹³ Stern condemnation was needed, considering the bankrupt nature of pharisaical religion. It did nothing to help people experience the life of God, and it was built on a a foundation of self-righteous pretense.

Jesus called the religious elite out for the way in which they placed an undue emphasis on religious dress. He spoke of their affection for being seen in their “long robes.” The Greek language refers to the coat of honor that was customarily worn by scholars and government officials.¹⁴ Jesus was not talking about the normal outer garment most people wore. It seems the religionists had taken pride in wearing prayer shawls. Instead of being a sign of supplication and prayer, it had become a sign of status and prestige. The Pharisees had taken the holy things of God and made them a platform for pride.

In addition, the Pharisees took great delight in “greetings in the marketplace.” Our Lord’s remarks did not deal with the customary salutation — “Hi, how are you?” — one might extend in public. Instead, the language referred to an expression of respect one might give to an authority.¹⁵ The religious leaders of Jesus’ day had come to expect such gestures. When others saw their religious garments, displays of subservience and respect were required.

Our Lord rebuked the establishment for its self-centered religion. In doing so, He demonstrated that false religion isn’t much different than the worst types of sin. It is merely another outworking of Satan’s age-old schemes. In 1 John 2:16, we learn that our archenemy, the Devil, attempts to ensnare people through three snares — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. Since the beginning of time (Genesis 3:1-7), he has attempted to use the same three snares to turn people from the God. Some may think false religionists are simply in bondage to false religion. Not true. False religionists are unknowingly duped by one of Satan’s three schemes — pride. Instead of humbling themselves to the truth of God, they use man-centered religion as a way to elevate their own reputation and earn recognition.

¹¹ Brooks, 201.

¹² Brooks, 202.

¹³ Robertson, 370.

¹⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 95.

¹⁵ Brooks, 202.

Though they seemed outwardly righteous and religious, the Pharisees were given over to a hunger for power and prestige. Most of their actions, no matter how holy they seemed on the exterior, were rooted in an ungodly desire for reputational advancement.

Verse 39

Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees' self-focused religion continued in verse 39 with Him calling them out for their love of "the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honor at banquets" (Mark 12:39). First-century Jews were well familiar with the "seats" of which Jesus spoke. James makes reference to the way in which local synagogues had choice seats (James 2:3). Historians say synagogues typically had a chest at the front of the synagogue that contained scrolls. It faced the congregation. Usually there was a bench directly in front of it. There were other benches in rows behind this bench. They were the second most desired seats in the synagogue. Most people desired a seat on one of the benches, as the only other places available were on the stone bench that surrounded the inside outer-walls of the synagogue, or worse yet on the floor. The first bench was the most coveted seat in the synagogue.¹⁶

Jesus also spoke of the way in which the Pharisees desired "places of honor at banquets." In first-century Judea, there were famous meals hosted in honor of religious and political officials. At such dinner occasions, hosts would offer chief places at the dining table to the most distinguished guests, usually on an elaborate couch close to the banquet table.¹⁷ It was customary for the dinner host to grant the privilege for one person to sit at his right hand and another person to sit at his left hand.¹⁸ Earlier in Mark's gospel, we saw some of Jesus' disciples seeking such places of honor for themselves (Mark 10:37). In our current passage, Jesus reproved the religious leaders of his day for their love of the prominence and prestige of such positions of honor. He demonstrated that we must ever be on guard against using our religion as a pretext for prideful self-advancement.

Verse 40

Jesus brought up another problem with the Pharisees' religion in verse 40, saying, "They devour widows' houses and say long prayers just for show. These will receive harsher judgment" (Mark 12:40). In the first-century world widows were completely destitute. In a time in which there were no pensions, government release, or 401(k)s, those without a husband were left to fend for themselves. Most were reduced to abject poverty, and required to beg for food for sustenance (Acts 6:1). One has commented on their condition, saying, "widows were helpless in the society of the day."¹⁹

By reading the New Testament, we learn that first-century false teachers often targeted widows (Mark 12:40-43 and 2 Timothy 3:6). Heretics had a reputation for "sponging on the hospitality of people of limited means."²⁰ Some report that first-century scribes were known for duping helpless widows into donating their homes to the temple. Since scribes were forbidden by the tradition of the elders to receive payment for their teaching, they relied on free will

¹⁶ Rogers, 95.

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 95.

¹⁸ Brooks, 202.

¹⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 95.

²⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 95.

contributions and gifts. Perhaps some abused the charity of others, looking for ways to extort money from unsuspecting worshipers.²¹

Jesus promised that such greedy false teachers “will receive harsher judgment.” His words concerning judgment formed his last words of public teaching in Mark’s gospel.²² Our Lord will give more teaching to his disciples in Mark 13:3–42, but Mark 12:40 contains the last words heard by the general populace. It is interesting to note that our Lord’s last public teaching was focused on judgment. His words emphasize the disastrous folly of false religion. The self-righteous Pharisees undoubtedly imagined they were safe from judgment, but they were deceived. According to Jesus, false religion would receive the most severe judgment at the end of time (Matthew 7:21–23 and 23:33).

²¹ Robertson, 371.

²² Ferguson, 206.