

[Mark 12:38-44](#)

The new pastor of a large independent church invited all the other local ministers to attend a concert being given at his church by a well-known Christian musician. He invited us not only to the concert, but to come and eat with the musician beforehand.

At the time I was single, and the thought of not having to cook and wash up for myself for an evening was appealing, so I went along beforehand. We had a very agreeable time over food, and then when it was time for the concert itself I noticed some people from one of my churches arriving and taking up some seats on the back row, so I went to join them.

After the gig, the pastor expressed surprise that I had sat at the back. "I had a seat for you on the platform with me," he said. I replied that was very kind of him, but really there were times when I felt I was up front in the public eye more than enough, and it was a pleasant change for me as a minister to sit at the back.

Later events were to show that that incident was merely the tip of the iceberg when it came to the pastor's attitudes. A few years later, his ministry at that church fell to pieces over issues surrounding the unholy trinity of money, sex, and power.

It's so dangerous to invest our status, identity, and security in the wrong things.

And that's what our reading is about today. I know I'm often critical of the way the Lectionary selects verses, but not this time. I find it helpful the way we get to read these two separate incidents together, because they both have a similar theme. I'm used to hearing the story of the widow's mite on its own, but to hear it alongside Jesus' earlier condemnation of religious leaders is illuminating.

Both of these stories show people with power and authority seeking a sense of status from public acclaim.

In the **first story**, the teachers of the law (who were not necessarily wealthy, well-paid religious leaders) enjoyed drawing attention to themselves by dressing in a special way and looking important in the synagogue and at banquets. They would have been on the platform at the concert I attended.

Me, me, me. Look at me, they say. It's a warped and dangerous approach to power and authority, so far from the servant model that Jesus taught.

And because their approach to power and authority deviates from the way of Jesus, it becomes a dangerous exercise. When it's all about me getting the attention, then the power available also gets used for – guess who? – Me.

We get a flavour of this when Jesus says,

⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.

Jesus knew what he was talking about. The Jewish historian

Josephus (*Ant.* 18.81-84) tells of a Jewish scoundrel exiled to Rome who affected the ways of a scribe ("he played the part of an interpreter of the Mosaic law and its wisdom") and succeeded in persuading a high-standing woman named Fulvia to make substantial gifts to the temple in Jerusalem. The bequests, however, were embezzled, and Rome – from Emperor Tiberius on to plebs in the street – was outraged.¹

Since the scribes were largely dependent on gifts from worshippers and benefactors for their livelihood this would be like a minister today finding a way to exploit congregational giving to feather his own nest.

We may not all have a position of power and influence, but we all need to take heed of the dangers of wanting the attention to be on ourselves. What we see here is that when that happens, corruption follows.

We need to remember the way of Jesus, which is to be a servant, not an attention-seeker.

Each Sunday when I'm at Byfleet there is a small way in which I try to remind you and myself about that important truth. You will have noticed that at the end of the service I don't process out down the centre aisle. I sneak off round the side, saying a quick thank-you to Vaughan or Peter on the laptop and to Adrian on the organ. I don't want you at the end of the service to be thinking about the person who led you in worship; I want you to be thinking about the object of our worship, Almighty God.

What can you do to remind yourself Jesus is the centre of attention in the Christian life, not you?

In the **second story**, the crowds are depositing their gifts for the Temple at the treasury. But some are making a flamboyant song and dance of it:

Many rich people threw in large amounts. (Verse 41b)

Why throw the money into the receptacle unless you want to be ostentatious about your giving? Once again, it's a case of 'Look at me!' Those looking on are meant to think, 'Wow, what wonderfully generous people!'

Again, the concern is to bolster up one's personal image. These are people who feel good about themselves when other people praise them.

I can't help thinking that these people would be the sort who today would turn up on a TV telethon like Children In Need or Comic Relief with an oversized cheque clearly bearing their name or their company's name, because they're less interested in helping the cause than in getting their name before the public and gaining publicity for themselves.

It's the widow who shows true faith in this story, of course. Hear again Jesus' estimation of her when she contributes 'two of the smallest coins in circulation'²:

⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.'

What's the difference between the widow and the wealthy? The widow puts her whole life in the hands of God. The wealthy keep control for themselves.

Thus, it's the widow who shows what discipleship is like, according to Jesus. True faith is not a lifestyle option from the glossy magazines with the Sunday papers. It is not a deluxe extra specification on your car. True faith is to say to Jesus, here I am with all that I am and all that I have. I put it all in your nail-scarred hands to do with as you see fit.

The widow would ask us whether we have put our entire lives at the disposal of our Lord. It's a life of sacrifice in response to the One who would lay down his own life very soon. Just as astronomers discovered that the Sun does not orbit the earth but rather the earth orbits the Sun, so the widow teaches us that we are not at the centre where the brightest and best orbit us. Rather, we orbit the Son – the Son of God.

And as these two episodes **conclude**, so also concludes Mark's account of Jesus' public ministry. Everything else will be behind closed doors or in secluded places. What are we like where no-one else sees us?

In such locations, we cannot be attention-seekers. In such places, we are challenged to remember that we make Jesus the centre of attention, not ourselves, and that as he laid down his life for us so we lay our lives before him to be used as he pleases.

Let us always remember that we orbit the Son, not vice-versa.

¹ James R Edwards, *The Gospel According To Mark*, p379.

² *Ibid.*, p381.