

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 12:38-44

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This story is a concrete instance of Jesus' formula, "Many who are first will be last and the last first." The scribes are first in Jesus' culture. The audience is addressed as the crowd in the temple. You may want to indicate the grandness of the temple in your introduction to the story. Jesus' warning is to the crowd and in Mark's context, to his audience.

The dynamics of distance in relation to the scribes are very clear. Jesus is seeking to create distance from the scribes who were respected authority figures in both his day and in Mark's day. This saying about the scribes follows the one positive encounter between Jesus and the scribes in the whole the Gospel of Mark: the story of the scribe who came and asked Jesus, "Teacher which is the first and greatest commandment?" Of Jesus' response scribe says, "You have answered well, Teacher, that to love God is more than all burnt offerings and sacrifice." And Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." This is a positive rabbinic discussion about the priority of the law. A critique of the scribes then follows.

The critique may also be addressed to the scribes in Jesus' audience and in Mark's audience. Their role was to write legal documents and to issue rulings on the legal dimensions of the Torah. They were a small elite of literate culture. Relatively few people could read in Jesus' culture, 10-15% at most, and of those who could read, a much smaller percentage were able to write anything more than their name. The scribes were the masters of the skills of literate culture. They had power and were prosperous as are many lawyers now.

The devouring of widow's houses is probably in reference to the process of distribution of inheritance to widows which scribes would oversee. Their houses were their inheritance from their husbands. The "devouring" that happened was that the scribes stole significant parts of their income. Widows were known in Jesus' day to be impoverished. Their treatment by the scribes was a major reason for that impoverishment. It may be that there were a few who also got sexual favors in return for consideration of the needs of the widows, but I doubt that it is a primary reference here. Money is more likely.

Jesus' final critique is that the scribes prayed for the sake of appearances. Jesus' condemnation is a clear instance of his teaching, "Many who are first will be last." In other words, scribes who are first now will be last in the kingdom of God.

The celebration of the widow is the reverse. The last will be first. Jesus' words are spoken in intimacy and of the deepest respect for the widow. His words to the disciples are words of wonder, "Truly I tell you, this widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. Look at this." Jesus honors this poor widow and her

contribution to the treasury of the Temple in the most extreme way. You may want in the introduction of this story to indicate how little her contribution is: "A widow came, put in two small copper coins which are but a penny." Some way of conveying the monetary insignificance of her contribution may be important as a prelude to Jesus' words of honor. It simply increases the contrast between the actual monetary worth of her gift, and Jesus' recognition of its spiritual worth.