

Powerful Hypocrisy

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced there's no one so good. They don't need God's grace, and no one's so bad they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word, because we believe that God has something to say to everyone. We're continuing our series in the Gospel of Mark. You'll remember that the Gospels tell the story of Jesus in His life and His death and His resurrection. We've just finished this series of questions that Jesus encounters. First of all, He receives three questions. The first two especially meant to trap Him. And then Jesus has turned the tables a little bit and decides it's time for Him to ask a question, and that's what we saw last time we were in the Gospel of Mark. He tells them, hey, how is it that the Messiah can be both David's Lord and His Son? How can someone be someone's father and their son at the same time? And that's when we talked about the fact that Jesus is a great encouragement to us, but also a great challenge as we see Him as our Lord as well.

In this section, then, Jesus is going to proceed from those questions to begin some teaching, although it's not disconnected from what's come before, because He's going to continue to needle and poke at the religious leaders that have come to attack Him. In this section, He's going to say, beware of the scribes. In other words, look out, watch out for religious hypocrisy. Watch out for people who say one thing and do another. And don't just watch out for them, but watch out for it in yourself.

It's timely for all of us. I'm sure there's been points in your life where you've looked at someone and you've thought, man, that person seems to know a lot maybe about the Bible, and they seem to be very active in the church, and they're also kind of a jerk. How does that work? You know, how does that go together? Maybe you're not a Christian. Maybe you're someone who has questions or doubts or objections to Christianity, and part of your objection is you look at the church and you say, those are people, they're just interested in power and money. They're just interested in their organization, what they can get. Now, if those are things that are on your mind, then this passage is for you because those things are on Jesus' mind as well. And so it's with that we're going to turn now to God's Word. We're in Mark chapter 12. You can turn with me in your worship guide. You can turn on your phone. You can turn in your Bible. No matter where you turn, remember that God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, which means that God has not left us to stumble alone in the dark, but instead he's given us his Word to show us the way to go. And so that's why we read now, starting at verse 38. And in his teaching, he said, beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's Word. Our Father in heaven, we thank you that you see the world as it is. You see its glory, but you also see its brokenness. You know that we wonder about that, and you haven't left us to figure it out on our own. Instead, you speak to us. You instruct us. You come alongside us like a good father to his children. And so we ask that you would do that this morning, that you'd send your Holy Spirit to help us. You'd help us to see our need for your mercy and your grace. And even more than that, you'd help us to see Jesus who meets us at that very same point of need. You'd help us to see him more clearly, that we'd see his power and his authority, his glory, his love, his holiness, his affection, and that we would grow in our love for him and our obedience to him. And we thank you that we don't worry about whether we've earned or deserved these things. We know that we haven't, but instead we simply ask for them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

There's a social psychologist named Jonathan Haidt who provides an illustration to help us understand what the power of the human heart actually is. He says, imagine that there's an elephant, and a very large, powerful elephant, and on top of this elephant there's a rider, and this rider guides the elephant determines which direction the elephant should go. But imagine as this rider and this elephant are working along together, the elephant decides he wants one thing, and the rider decides he wants another. And they come to an impasse. There's a disagreement about which way to go. Well, who in that disagreement is going to win? Is it going to be the large and powerful and strong elephant, or is it going to be this small man or small woman on top of the elephant? Well, if the elephant has a mind of its own, the answer is obvious, right? The elephant is going to win every single time. Yes, the rider might be on top. It might, in a sense, appear to be in control, but the elephant is so much greater, so much more powerful. He uses this to say the rider, in a sense, is the logic that we use. It's the conscious mind. And to put it in Christian terms, we might say the rider is our worldview. It's what we say we believe. The elephant, on the other hand, is the heart. The elephant is actually what we love, what we want, what we desire, what, at our deepest core, we want more than anything else. And this is a way of illustrating that our hearts are, in many ways, more powerful than our minds. In fact, he points out there's psychological research that shows that the mind comes in after the heart to defend and explain what the heart already decided it wanted. In other words, our emotions say, we want X. Mind, go find a way to justify X. Find an explanation for why what my heart already loves is true. Of course, we don't need psychological research to tell us that. Back in the 16th century, there was a man named Thomas Cranmer, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury. And one scholar summarizes his teaching in this way, what the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies. What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies. The elephant is more powerful than the rider. Our hearts are much more powerful than what we say we believe, what we state on paper. Jesus also tells us this in Matthew chapter 12. He says, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

[7 : 46] Now, what does this have to do with religious hypocrisy and the scribes that we encounter in this passage? Well, they are hitting on a theme that we've already seen many times before in the Gospel of Mark, and it's the theme of the desires of the heart, what it is that we want. We've seen it many times, but I'll just give you a few examples. You may remember back to Mark chapter 6 when John the Baptist was beheaded, and what was the problem there? Well, Herodias, Herod's wife, wanted to put John the Baptist to death. That's the word that's used. Herod asks Herodias' daughter, what is it that you want? She says, I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter, and then we're told that Herod did not want to break his word. All of those, the same Greek word, which we see again. Mark chapter 10, you'll remember James and John come to Jesus and make this incredibly embarrassing request.

They say, teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. And then Jesus has this question that he asks to both them and the blind man in Mark chapter 10. He says, what do you want me to do for you? And if you were there when we went through that chapter, you remember, on the one hand, James and John want power and glory and exaltation as they sit at Jesus' left and right hand.

On the other hand, the blind man simply wants to see. And this is after Jesus has given them this instruction in the previous chapter.

If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all. I bring up these three episodes because they all use the same Greek word that we encounter here in verse 38. And in his teaching, he said, beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces, have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts. This word like is not strong enough to describe what's happening for the scribes. We might say not that they like it, but that they love it. They enjoy it and delight in it. This is what they live for. This is what brings joy and pleasure to their lives. This is what makes life worth living. And in fact, that word like, to desire, to want appears once as a verb, and then it applies to all of those four things that follow.

So they love to be seen in fine clothing. They love to be greeted. They like to have the best seats. They like to have the places of honor. Simply, Jesus is saying that these religious leaders, their heart is captured by love and power and recognition and fame and honor and respect and privilege and comfort. That is what they live for more than anything else. They love wearing their nice clothes. What they're probably wearing here are wonderful white linen robes. If these scribes live today, maybe they're shooting each other mirror selfies of how great that outfit is. If some of the scribes are Gen Z scribes, they might be talking about how they're all about a good fit. They are devoted to some serious drip. That is what the scribes love. That's what they live for. That is what has captured their hearts and their affections. They like to be seen. They love to be the big man on campus.

[11 : 17] And why does Jesus bring this up here in this section, this passage, this series of teachings? Remember, it's the religious leaders who've been coming and trying to trap him.

And it's the religious leaders who decided the game wasn't fun anymore when Jesus told them this. Remember, they asked him about the sum of the law. And what did Jesus say?

The sum of the law is to love God and love neighbor. And so there's this incredible irony. These experts in the law have missed the most important thing. They have missed what matters more than anything else.

They should be loving God and loving others. Instead, they are loving themselves and destroying and devouring others. And so this takes the issue of the heart, the critical nature of the heart that we've seen throughout the gospel of Mark. It takes it and applies it to religious leaders and religious activity. In other words, the point is this. It is possible to have good answers and lots of theological knowledge and to be very far from God. It is possible to have good answers and lots of theological knowledge and to also be very far from God. Being in church, being involved in all sorts of religious activity does not protect us. It does not make us immune from loving ourselves more than God.

In fact, religious communities can be a phenomenal place to hide out. No, you don't need to ask me about my spiritual life or my loves, what I do with my time and my money and my power. I go to church every Sunday. It's all good.

[13 : 30] I'm involved in so many ministries. Of course, everything is fine. I have all the right answers.

And yet the problem is that the elephant always wins. The problem is that the heart is what comes out on top. There was a big push in the conservative church back in the 90s and the 2000s for what people would call worldview, which was this idea that we need to make sure that everyone is thinking correctly about all the issues in the world. And the problem that we have, especially with our youth, is that they're not thinking correctly. And if we can just change their minds and give them the right content and the ideas, they will be able to stand firm in a culture that does not love God.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. Worldview really matters. And not thinking correctly is a real problem. And so part of what we do as a church is try to explain how we think clearly as Christians in the world. The problem is this. It doesn't matter how well someone thinks if your heart is somewhere else.

It is necessary to have a good worldview. It is not sufficient. Plenty of kids from that generation had the right ideas and walked away because they loved something else more.

Remember, Mark chapter 10, we met the rich young man. He comes to Jesus. He says, what do I need to do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus says, well, it's really easy. All you need to do is sell your possessions and follow me. And we're told he went away sorrowful for he was not thinking clearly about how the world operates. No, that's not what it says. It says he went away sorrowful for he had great possessions. Jesus gave him the right answer. It just wasn't enough. There was something he loved more. Something he wanted more.

[15 : 46] Now, again, don't hear what I'm not saying. For 2 Peter chapter 1, it says, knowledge is important. It's critical for our growth spiritually. Necessary, just not sufficient. It's the elephant that wins. It's the heart that wins.

And so these scribes, why do we need to beware of them? Verse 38. Because they have lots of knowledge and no love. And so that's why Jesus gives this warning. He says, beware. Watch out. Be on guard against these scribes. And there's a variety of ways we could take that.

One way would just be to say, steer clear of them. Know that they don't have your best interest in mind. But another way to take it would be this. Beware of their influence.

Know that that's not what true spirituality looks like. Know that that's not the path that God calls you to. Know how damaging that is. Beware of being like them.

Part of the reason we can take this in that way is that Jesus then follows up what we'll look at next week with a positive example. Okay, on the one hand, beware of these folks. They show you what you should not, how you should not live your life.

[17 : 02] On the other hand, look at this poor widow who gives God all she has. And see the contrast. See what true spirituality, true love of God looks like in real life.

And so for us to beware means this, that we examine our own hearts. What fills our imaginations, our dreams, our hopes, our desires.

What is it that we want more than anything else? What is the elephant going to run after when no one can stop it?

Beware of the scribes because they love themselves more than they love God. I've told you before that money and power are not bad things.

In fact, we need people with money and power. They're not bad things. They're just dangerous things. And the dangerous thing about both money and power is that they turn up the volume on what is already in your heart.

[18 : 11] Turn up the volume on what is already in your heart. If you're selfish and convenience is what you love more than anything else, more power and more money will just allow you to be more selfish and to put yourself first in a greater extent.

If you love others and you're filled with compassion, money and power will turn up the volume on that. People will see more and more your love and your compassion. So what is it that motivates us?

What is it that you're hoping to gain from service to God, service in the church? Is it about you? Is it about being seen?

About people listening to your words? About having access and information? Or is it about bringing glory and honor to God alone?

No matter who sees. No matter who thanks you. Beware then reminds us to examine our hearts.

[19 : 16] To beware of being like these religious leaders who are full of knowledge and activity and empty on love. If you're not a Christian, or maybe you are a Christian, but you've been deeply hurt by religious people.

If you're upset and angry at religious hypocrisy, hear this. Jesus is also upset and angry at religious hypocrisy.

If religious hypocrisy, if you look at people and you say their lives and what they say to believe don't match up at all. How can that be? Jesus says, yes, I see it too.

And I agree. We've already seen Mark chapter 11. Jesus is so upset about that when he examines the temple and sees that people are being blocked from the house of prayer. Where they're actually supposed to have access to God.

What does he do? He goes in and turns over the tables. And so join with Jesus in that. Join with Jesus in being upset about religious hypocrisy, in being incensed about widows being devoured.

[20 : 30] Just don't abandon his church. Be upset as Jesus is upset. Stay committed to his people as Jesus stays committed to his people.

Jesus agrees with you about the problem. But another problem is that the solution isn't giving up on God and his church. Remember, we talked about two times ago that the love of God is what allows us to fully love our neighbors.

I told you that there were two mistakes we could fall into. First, we could try to love God without loving others. That's sort of what these scribes are doing. But then the other mistake we can fall into is try to love others without loving God.

That's the mistake of secular people. What happens is if we try to love others without loving God, we don't have God's instructions, his directions for life.

And so we have this limited, this incorrect view of what's good for us and others. We can't throw out the baby with the bathwater. We say, yes, we agree with Jesus.

[21 : 41] We stand against the abuse of power and religious authority. And we know that the church is the place of God's power in his presence.

And so we work for his good. I found a new favorite story recently. I heard about a story of a pastor who's talking to some folks and they find out he's a minister.

And they say, yeah, we, you know, we try a church for a while, but it's, we just don't want to be there because it's so full of hypocrites. The pastor said, well, it might be full of hypocrites, but I'm sure we can make room for a couple more.

Solzhenitsyn said, and I've quoted many times before, that the line between good and evil cuts through the center of every human heart. And so the beware here is to remind us of our own hypocrisy, to push us again to self-examination.

Giving up on God is not the solution. We actually need his guidance and his church to love others rightly. In fact, moving away from God always leads to some form of dehumanization.

[23 : 04] What I mean by that is this, we have two choices. We can love God and love our neighbors, or we can love ourselves and push down our neighbors.

And so that's what we see next in this passage. We've spent a lot of time on verses 38 and 39, which show us that the scribes serve themselves. But then in verse 40, we see they don't just serve themselves, they exploit others.

Verse 40 tells us this, they devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation. Now, we're not told in this passage how exactly it is that they're devouring widows' houses.

We can speculate. Perhaps they're taking advantage somehow of their generosity, their hospitality. Maybe they're taking advantage of them in terms of some deceit about how money is being used.

Maybe they're overcharging them for certain services that they're providing. Some people even see a connection between the exploitation and the long prayers. Maybe they're being paid for these long prayers.

[24 : 05] Who knows? What we do know is this, they're abusing their position of power to give their hearts what it loves, more than anything else, that fame and honor and respect and privilege and comfort.

Remember I told you power and money are amplifiers. The more you have, the more you get to see your heart. Whatever is there, it will turn up the volume.

It's not a coincidence that next week, verses 41 through 44, we're going to talk about money. Because it reveals our hearts.

And so in this exploitation, we see another element of this command to beware. It gives us another way to examine ourselves. Before I said, examine our hearts so that we know what fills our imaginations, our dreams, our hopes, our desires.

This exploitation gives us another way to examine them. How do we treat those who have less power than we do? How do we talk about them?

[25 : 14] How do we interact with them? What do we do when someone has less money than we do? What happens when we have the opportunity to fudge the truth?

And what is it that we believe we gain? In other words, what do money and power reveal about our hearts? When the volume is turned up, what is it that we hear?

That's Jesus' warning. That's why he says, beware. Watch out. Matthew 25, Jesus says this, Truly I say to you, if you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.

These scribes are trampling on the most vulnerable members of society. And Jesus tells us, whatever we do for the least of these, we do it for him.

And so these are the searching questions that come out from this passage. What is it that we love more than anything else? How is it that we treat people with less power and influence and money than us?

[26 : 41] Problem though, is even if we find out the answer, we can't think our way out of it. Because the elephant is more powerful than the rider.

The solution is not to think better, but to love more. And so that's why we sing together the song, Hast thou seen him, heard him, known him?

Is not thine a captured heart? Not do we have the right thoughts, but do we have the right loves? So we'll come back to the question that we've asked before.

What is it that captures our hearts? What is it that makes Jesus beautiful? What is it about Jesus that turns us away from love of self towards love for God?

What is it about Jesus that changes us to love our neighbor? Well, one of them is that Jesus is the opposite of the scribes. Jesus is not interested in being seen.

[27 : 43] He's not interested in being the big man on campus. Instead, he comes living essentially in poverty. If you look on the back of your worship guide, you'll see the quote that talks about Luke chapter 24, when two disciples walked with the risen Christ, not recognizing to them until he was known by them in the breaking of bread.

Having just accomplished the most stunning event in time and eternity, Jesus was known not by his glory, power, entourage, trappings, or number of followers, but by his nail-scarred hands breaking bread.

That is our God. In other words, we can give up power, recognition, fame, honor, privilege, respect, and comfort as we look at Jesus and see him in his beauty and his glory because he gives up the same.

Because of how great and loving he is, because of the security that we have in him and through him, that is the way and the only way we are able to change the desires, the direction, the strength, the elephant of our hearts.

I gave you before, earlier, a list of this word want and desire that comes out throughout the gospel of Mark, and we're going to see it show up again.

[29 : 07] In Mark chapter 14, we are going to hear Jesus specifically talk about what he wants and desires. He's praying to his father, and he says this, Abba, Father, all things are possible for you.

Remove this cup from me, yet not what I will, but what you will. Not what I want, but what you want. Not what brings me delight and pleasure, but what brings you delight and pleasure.

So we lay down our wills and our hearts and our desires. We give them to love God and love others because Jesus gave up his will, his heart, his desire for us.

That is what makes Jesus beautiful. That is what grows our love and affection for him. And so that's what we're going to sing in our closing hymn on page eight.

We're going to say, May the love of Jesus fill me as the waters fill the sea, him exalting, self-abasing. This is victory. Him exalting means we love him.

[30 : 14] Self-abasing means we don't love ourselves. And so we're then able to sing that last verse. May his beauty rest upon me as I seek to make him known so that all may look to Jesus seeing him alone.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you that you love us more than we love ourselves, that it's safe to belong to you.

We ask that you would show us that love more and more. We'd understand it and experience it, and that it would change us at our deepest levels. It would change our wants and our desires and our wills, that we would want what you want, that we would love you and love others.

We ask for these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I invite you to stand for our closing hymn.