

**Observations**  
**Mark 12: 38-44**  
**November 7, 2021**  
**Rev. L. Bryan McClain**

Do you ever like to sit and watch people? I know being able to do that has been challenging, if not nearly impossible, over the last year and a half. But still. To watch people in their environment or their usual hustle and bustle can often tell you a lot about them. You may observe the clothes they wear, the way they talk or jester to their friends or family. Are they engaged? Are they distant? Do they seem sad or happy, or do they act entitled, or are they humble? Are they rich or poor? Do they seem sincere and genuine, or are you suspicious of what they may be up to?

Sometimes it is hard to size people up. You never know what is going on in their lives as they scramble to get the kids off to school, get to work, deal with the pressures of life with bills, family, or other mounting problems that creep into their lives. But then again, sometimes, there are generalities that if we observe long enough, we begin to notice a trend, a pattern of behavior that does begin to tell us more about the people we take notice of.

In this passage from Mark's Gospel, we find Jesus observing quite a bit. I believe this was perhaps one of Jesus's favorite hobbies; watching all kinds of people. Rich, poor, socially and politically elevated, and those who were barely known at all.

That is the case in today's lesson. Though it does not tell us that Jesus is watching the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, we do know from the previous passages in Mark that Jesus has been dealing with them and their craftiness. Out of all of those stories here in Mark's gospel, there is only one teacher of the law that asks Jesus the question about which is the greatest commandment and Jesus responds, "To love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind, and all of your strength." It is the Shema. This was the part of the Torah that Jews wore either on their forehead or around their wrist. But then Jesus added another layer that was actually from Deuteronomy; Love your neighbor as yourself.

To this, the teacher of the law agreed. And Jesus told him that he was not far from the Kingdom of God.

But for the most part, teachers of the law, the Scribes, the Pharisees, those who put laws and traditions to show their love of God over and above the command to love your neighbor as yourself, were far more prevalent in Jewish society. It is to these people that Jesus directs his disciples' attention as he says, "Watch out!"

To love God may well be something they had to do by the law of the Torah, but to love those around you, especially those you may consider beneath you; that was pushing it, as Jesus' last two encounters with scribes and Pharisees before this one illustrates.

They were trying to trap Jesus with questions about paying taxes to Caesar and marriage after the resurrection to try and trip him up and prove to the people that he was just another fraud, which they could not do.

But Jesus had been doing his own observing. Watching the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and the sort, for the most part walking around looking important, acting important, creating their own system to pay for the sacrifices that were offered, meanwhile taking from the poorest of the poor for all that they could, and not be the least bit concerned about their welfare really stood out.

"Watch out," he says, "for the teachers of the law, for they like to walk around in flowing robes, be greeted in market places, have the most important seats, and be honored at banquets. They do all of that and then also devour widows' houses, taking whatever they can to fund their need for greed." These were some of the very people who place it was to help the needy, the destitute, the poor widows, and orphans.

By contrast, Jesus then focuses on a collection site outside the temple, and he is watching all of those putting in their offering. As you might imagine, most give rather nice sums of money, but no one is making an offering of sacrifice that challenges them to rely on God, to really trust God. Instead, they all give out of their abundance. Let me say that another way. They all give out of what they feel like they can spare. Like when someone asks you, "Hey friend, can you spare a dollar?"

But then Jesus notices this poor widow. Perhaps one that was on the verge of losing her house, as perhaps the teachers of the law, were getting ready to foreclose on her; he notices that she puts in two coins that were worth less than one penny, Jesus tells us that she has given everything that she has. Because it is all she has to give, she has given more than anybody else making an offering that day. She has literally sacrificed not just 10%, which is all that God asks of us, not even 20 or fifty or even 75 or 90%, she has given everything.

The contrast between the teachers of the law and this poor widow could not be greater. But the contrast is not just about how the teachers of the law saw themselves versus the woman or what they wore or how they came across to the general public. The contrast Jesus notices is how much faith the woman has in God to help her survive compared to the teachers' faith in themselves and not God.

God sees what we give and why we give it. God looks at our piety on parade versus our piety of heart and soul. And God knows when we serve the law to serve really our own egos and interests and when we truly go all out to serve those who are in need. Those who are again often forgotten by the majority of people.

As we ponder this passage this morning, it should challenge all of us to make some observations of our own, to reflect on our own motives, not just in giving of our tithes; this goes way beyond that. It should cause all of us to consider how we show our love and our trust in God beyond material and financial wealth, status, and public perception.

Let us remember that it was Jesus who dared to be seen eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors and the sick and diseased, the poor and lame. But then he also invited them to follow him into a community where they could find real healing and hope through that power of God that is love and grace.

When any church turns its focus on the needs of the least in their community and how it may address those needs with care and compassion, then like that poor widow that nobody else noticed but Jesus, God will lift it up. But to do that takes ultimate trust in what God can do. So beyond observing others and ourselves, take time each day to observe just what God can do.