

Mark 12:38-44 “Looks Can Be Deceiving”**

Main Idea: Looks can be deceiving, especially when it comes to spirituality. Jesus taught two vital lessons about spirituality in Mark 12:38-44.

I. Lesson #1: What looks significant may not be significant (38-40).

A. Here is what hypocrites *desire*.

1. They want to appear spiritual.
2. They want to receive men’s recognition.
3. They want positions of authority and honor.

B. Here is what hypocrites *do*.

1. They use people for personal gain.
2. They use prayer to put on a show.

C. Here is what hypocrites *will experience*.

1. God will not merely punish them.
2. God will punish them most severely.

D. Here is what hypocrites *need*.

1. They need humility.
2. They need the Savior.

II. Lesson #2: What looks insignificant may be very significant (41-43).

A. There are givers who look impressive to us.

1. They give a lot.
2. They keep what matters most.

B. There are givers who look impressive to the Lord.

1. They give sacrificially.
2. They give because they value God and His kingdom.
3. They give because they know they have received so much.

Take Inventory: I can deceive others and myself, but not God.

When I was a teen our youth group traveled to a local rest home to minister to the residents. It was Halloween and we each dressed up for the occasion. I dressed up as a little old man. My costume was a little too realistic for at least one person at the rest home who thought I truly was old and lived there! Looks can be deceiving.

You're seated in a Starbucks drinking your coffee and notice a well dressed man at the next table. You size him up: expensive suit, fancy briefcase, state of the art laptop. You instantly assume, based on appearances, that this man is wealthy. That may be true. But it may be that his is borrowed wealth—his credit cards are maxed, his home double mortgaged—and payday is coming. Once again, looks can be deceiving.

Visit the typical church on Sunday morning and you'll find smiling people shaking hands, exchanging pleasantries, appearing quite happy and fulfilled. But behind the plastic smiles, behind the closed doors of the homes where not a few of those folks live there are *no smiles*. Instead, those castles are more like, at best, hotel rooms where strangers exist side by side, and at worst, prison cells, where family members live in isolation from and hostility towards each other.

Yes, looks can be deceiving. People can put on a show. What you see is not always the way things really are. The glitter is not always gold.

The tragic reality is that looks can be deceiving when it comes to *spirituality*. A person can appear to be quite close to God yet not even know God. This is no trivial matter. The stakes for spiritual deception are eternal. How does God determine if a person is truly spiritual in a way that pleases Him? You might be surprised at the answer.

This morning our journey brings us to the final section of Mark 12. Jesus teaches us two vital lessons about spirituality in Mark 12:38-44.

I. Lesson #1: What looks significant may not be significant (38-40).

Before developing our first lesson, let's identify the context. It's Jesus' final week of earthly ministry, His passion week. It's probably late Tuesday or early Wednesday, the cross is approaching. The Jewish leaders have been trying to use trick questions to trip up Jesus in tag team fashion, with the chief priests, scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees each taking turns, and each failing. You need to realize these folks were the "good guys" in first century Israel, at least according to popular opinion. But Jesus offered a very different assessment of them, of their *spirituality*...

Verses 38-40—"As he taught, Jesus said, 'Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces,³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.'"

Jesus here offers a strong and severe warning. "Watch out!" "Look out!" "Be on guard! Danger lurks!" Just what was the source of this threat? The answer is quite shocking. Jesus did NOT say, "Watch out for Nero, that notorious, promiscuous Roman ruler!" Nor did He say, "Watch out for the loose living prostitutes and tax collectors that set bad examples for your kids!" No. Instead He said, "Watch out for *the teachers of the law!*"

The teachers of the law?! Is that what Jesus said? Yes. Who were these dangerous foes of which the Lord urged His disciples to beware? On the surface, they were what we might call "charter church member material." They were men who studied the Hebrew Scriptures with great care, *scribes* as they're sometimes called. They were professional copyists, individuals who labored to copy God's law in order to protect it and promote its teaching. They looked to Ezra as their spiritual ancestor (Ezra 7:12). We might call them 'men of the cloth,' for they were the most religious people in Israel. If you had a question about the Bible, you went to these guys.

R. Alan Cole observes, "They were...professional biblical expositors and commentators, and devoted to the biblical text as few others have been; they were conservative and reverent in their approach to the Bible as they knew it." [uu](#)

It was concerning these men that Jesus said, "Watch out!" Why? Simply put, when it came to spirituality they were *hypocrites*.

Some years ago a remarkable picture was exhibited in London . As you looked at it from a distance, you seemed to see a monk engaged in prayer, his hands clasped, his head bowed. As you came nearer, however, and examined the painting more closely, you saw that in reality he was squeezing a lemon into a punch bowl!^[2]

Jesus here gives us four insights about hypocrites.

A. Here is what hypocrites *desire*. They do what they do, as do all people, because of the desires that rule their hearts. They *want* something. Jesus identifies three *wants*.

1. *They want to appear spiritual.* Verse 38 indicates, “They like to walk around in flowing robes.” Numbers 15:38 instructed the Jews to wear tassels on the edge of their outer robe, as a reminder that they were the distinct people of God. But these men took it a step further.

The scribes wore long white linen robes. And they walked around in them, desirous for people to see and approve of their obvious spirituality.

Simply put, Jesus said these men dressed to impress. They used clothing to communicate spirituality, or so they thought.

Do people ever do that today? Yes. Some people equate spirituality with certain clothing styles and convince themselves that God is pleased merely because they wear those styles (“I wear a tie to church, therefore, I’m spiritual”). By the way, some people go to the other extreme and believe they are spiritual because they do NOT wear those styles (“I *never* wear a tie to church, therefore I’m spiritual!”). But the issue isn’t dress. It’s *why* you wear what you wear. It’s why you DON’T wear what you don’t wear.

A hypocrite wants to appear spiritual. Here’s a second want...

2. *They want to receive men’s recognition.* Jesus indicated they like “to be greeted in the marketplaces.” First century Jewish teachers were addressed by such titles as “Rabbi,” “Father,” and “Master.” Rabbi means “My great one.”^[3]

That’s what these men wanted, the public recognition of people. That’s what drove their supposed spirituality. They wanted people to think well of them—and to speak well of them.

3. *They want positions of authority and honor.* Verse 39—“They like...to have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.” When they went to the synagogue they made sure they sat in the prominent seats so all could see and admire their spirituality. The same thing happened when they went to banquets. They craved the best seats and the authority and honor those seats communicated.

Woodrow Wilson once described a minister he met as the only man he knew who could “strut while sitting down.”^[4]

Hypocrisy is fundamentally a heart problem. Yes, it shows up in actions, as we’ll see next, but it begins in a heart that craves, that lusts, that longs for the approval and praise of others. In order to change a hypocrite, that’s what must change, not just the hypocritical actions but the heart that produces those actions. And only the Spirit of God can produce such heart change. If you struggle with hypocrisy, ask the Holy Spirit to do His radical surgery on your heart.

B. Here is what hypocrites *do*. According to Jesus, two things...

1. *They use people for personal gain.* Verse 40—“They devour widow’s houses.” The scribes were not allowed to be paid for their services, but were to depend on gifts for their livelihood. That led to abuse. Wealthy widows in particular were preyed upon by greedy and persuasive men of the cloth.

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it, “only today it is Social Security checks instead of shekels,” as Hughes puts it. It is a serious thing for a person to use his or her position of authority, by throwing in some charisma and pseudo-charm, to

exploit the needy and vulnerable. That's what hypocrites do. They use people for personal gain.

2. *They use prayer to put on a show.* Jesus said they "for a show make lengthy prayers." Long prayers aren't necessarily bad. The problem is any prayer that's given to make a self-exalting impression.

During one of his political campaigns, a delegation called on Theodore Roosevelt at his home in Oyster Bay, Long Island. The President met them with his coat off and his sleeves rolled up.

"Ah, gentlemen," he said, "come down to the barn and we will talk while I do some work."

At the barn, Roosevelt picked up a pitchfork and looked around for the hay. Then he called out, "John, where's all the hay?"

"Sorry, sir," John called down from the hayloft. "I ain't had time to toss it back down again after you pitched it up while the Iowa folks were here." [\[5\]](#)

Dear friend, hypocrisy is something we all battle, doing things to appear to be other than we really are. Why did I come to church today? Why am I preaching this sermon? Why did you serve in VBS this week? Why do you have a Bible on your coffee table? Beware of doing things, even things that God commands, in order to impress people. Hypocrisy is no trivial matter...

C. Here is what hypocrites will experience. Note carefully Jesus' words at the end of verse 40, "Such men will be punished most severely." Did you catch that? Concerning the fate of the teachers of the law, Jesus said that...

1. *God will not merely punish them.* But in fact...

2. *God will punish them most severely.* There are degrees of punishment. All who die in their sins will be cut off from God. That's true. But those who abuse spiritual advantages will receive even *greater punishment*. "How will it be greater?" you ask. I don't know, but Jesus said it will be.

It's a serious thing to play games with God, to pretend to be spiritual, to use the things of God for self-promoting reasons. It's especially serious to *tell others* how to be right with God but not take heed yourself.

We read this charge in James 3:1, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." R. Alan Cole comments, "Greater knowledge and greater opportunity only brings greater responsibility, which can, if rejected, bring greater condemnation." [\[6\]](#)

Please know this about Jesus. While on earth He was a great friend of sinners, but a firm critic of the hypocritical religious person. With the prostitutes and tax collectors He showed great patience in order to rescue them out of their sin, but with the merely religious He expressed firm and shocking disapproval, not out of hatred but intense love, love that took the risk to expose them in order to rescue them out of their vanity and from the impending fires of hell that await all who pretend to know God.

J. D. Jones put it this way, "It is a singular thing that Christ's sternest words were reserved not for the open and notorious sinners, but for the hypocrites, the sinners who wore the mask of goodness. Sham religion, false goodness was, in our Lord's eyes, worse than open badness, and it would receive 'greater condemnation.'" [\[7\]](#)

Such will be punished most severely. Is there hope for a hypocrite? Praise God, yes!

D. Here is what hypocrites need. Two things...

1. *They need humility.* "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6)." The first step to being right with God is *down*. "Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up (James 4:10)." That's what hypocrites need, to stop trying to impress people and bow in sincerity before the One whose assessment truly matters, and while there to acknowledge the painful truth about their wretched sinfulness. That's what hypocrites need. That's

what we all need if we are to be right with God. *Humility*. Then...

2. *They need the Savior*. It takes more than merely acknowledging your sin to be right with God. A holy God cannot merely overlook your sin, no matter how sorry you are for it. Your sin must be judged.

That's why God sent His Son into the world as a man. Jesus, the Son of God, came to die the sinner's death, to take the sinner's penalty, to endure the sinner's hell. That's what Jesus did on the cross, dear friend, and three days later He rose from the grave in triumphant victory. What He did is sufficient to save anyone, including the most vile and self-deluded hypocrite. But to be saved you must humble yourself before God and believe in His Son, receiving Him into your life as your Savior and Master.

So there's lesson #1. What looks significant may not be significant. It matters not how impressive a person may be in the eyes of men. It's God's assessment that matters, God's alone.

II. Lesson #2: What looks insignificant may be very significant (41-43).

Verse 41—"Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury." Notice that Jesus is *watching*. Teaching involves more than talking. Sometimes it involves *watching*.

Mark tells us what Jesus saw, people giving their money in the temple. The event took place in the court of the women. The temple treasury was located there. Devout Jews came there and dropped their offerings in one of the thirteen trumpet-shaped collection boxes.

So Jesus took a seat and watched the givers. He saw two kinds of givers that day, the same two kinds of givers that exist today.

A. There are givers who look impressive to us. Verse 41 concludes, "Many rich people threw in large amounts." Here's the first thing about givers that look impressive to us...

1. *They give a lot*. Mark says these rich folks threw in "large amounts." They had a lot to give—they were *rich* people—and so they gave a lot.

By the way, we would be wrong to assume from this that the Lord is displeased with the offerings of wealthy people. It's likely that there were others that day besides the widow we're about to meet whose gifts pleased heaven. But Jesus' doesn't comment on them, only her.

There's a second trait of this first kind of giver. First, they give a lot...

2. *They keep what matters most*. Giving to God is good—in fact, God commands it. But giving money to God is supposed to reflect our appreciation for God. Indeed, our giving is to reflect what matters most in our living. So it's possible to give God some money, even a lot of money, but fail to give Him what He desires most of all... *you*.

To put it another way, the real issue isn't how much a person gives. It's what that person does with what they don't give.

So there's the first kind of giver, the ones who look impressive to us. In verse 42 we meet a second kind of giver...

B. There are givers who look impressive to the Lord. Verse 42—"But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny." In contrast to the rich givers who dropped big bucks in the plate, here's a very insignificant, lowly widow lady whose tiny coins barely make a sound when she puts them in. That doesn't sound too impressive, does it? Maybe not to us, but it sure impressed Jesus. Watch what He did...

Verses 43-44—“Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, ‘I tell you the truth, 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.’”

Three things are true givers who truly please the Lord...

1. *They give sacrificially.* The widow gave two copper coins. The word is *lepta*, referring to the smallest coin in circulation in first century Israel. *Lepton* literally means “a tiny thing” (the English word ‘mite’). It was worth one-sixty-fourth of a denarius (the daily wage of a laborer). The NIV gives the value, “worth only a fraction of a penny.”

But don’t be fooled by the size of the gift. What impressed the Lord was that this gift was *sacrificial*. Though small, it cost this woman a lot to give it. Barclay states, “The amount of the gift never matters so much as its cost to the giver, not the size of the gift, but the sacrifice.”

J. D. Jones observes, “The rich men cast in their gold; but they never missed what they gave. They had not to deny themselves a single luxury. They had not to give up anything. They had not to dress in cheaper clothes or keep a plainer table. They had not, as a result, to do without anything. But it was otherwise with the poor widow. Her two mites made little difference to the amount of the collection. But it made a vast difference to her. It meant giving up her bite of bread, or drop of milk, or morsel of honey for that day. It was all she had to live upon until she worked for more...The amount of sacrifice involved in it decides the value of a gift in heaven’s sight.”^[8]

That’s why Jesus said this widow gave more than the others. She truly sacrificed. She “out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

Think about the person who drops a ten dollar bill into the church offering plate and thinks to himself, “The size doesn’t matter to God. It’s the fact that I’m giving something that matters.” Hold on. What did Jesus say? The size of the gift doesn’t matter IF the gift is sacrificial. The question is, is the gift sacrificial?

When I was a teenager and got my first job bailing hay, making about \$2 per hour, putting a \$10 bill in the church offering meant something. The same was true when I was in seminary going to school full time, living paycheck to paycheck (a construction job at \$5 per hour). Today God has blessed me with a home, the ability to eat out at restaurants, go on vacations, have a closet full of clothes and cupboards filled with food, and so much more. The question is, “Is a \$10 bill a sacrificial gift now?”

According to Jesus, that’s the question that matters. Am I giving sacrificially?

To reiterate, this widow did not give a little gift. It was *huge* to her. God does not measure the size of the gift by the number on the currency or coin, but by the cost it is to us. J. D. Jones puts it this way, “So long as there is genuine sacrifice in the gift, we need not worry about the amount. And there is often, as in this case, much more sacrifice in the smaller than the larger offerings.”^[9]

I’ll be honest. I’ve got a lot to learn about sacrificial giving. I’ve met brothers and sisters in Ukraine—we’d call them peasants—who remind me of this woman by their rich generosity. Plummer put it this way, “The means of the giver and the motive are the measure of true generosity.”^[10]

Barclay hits the nail on the head when he writes, “For many of us it is a real question if ever our giving to God’s work is any sacrifice at all. Few people will do without their pleasures to give a little more to the work of God. It may well be a sign of the decadence of the church and the failure of our Christianity that gifts have to be coaxed out of church people, and that often they will not give at all unless they get something back in the way of entertainment or of goods. There can be few of us who read this story without shame.”^[11]

Givers who capture the Lord’s attention give sacrificially. Secondly...

2. *They give because they value God and His kingdom.* Note that the widow gave *two* coins. She could have kept one. She wasn’t required to give both. But she *wanted* to. That’s the point.

Why did this woman give? It wasn't to get a tax deduction, or her name on a plaque, or a pat on the back from onlookers. No. This widow was giving to please God.

I remember another widow who came to me once, who, after the door was closed said to me in the privacy of my study, "Pastor, I want to give a gift for such and such a ministry need, but I don't want anyone to know where it came from." I explained that she could give confidentially through the offering system, but she replied, "No. I'd rather no one else know. I've always tried to practice what Jesus said...*Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.*" That widow is in heaven now, but her selfless example lives on in my mind.

It's important to keep in mind who Jesus is talking to in this teaching about giving. He's talking to *His disciples* (43). It's not to the world but to His own people that He stresses the importance of generous giving.

Why is that important? Because until you are saved, you tend to think that you can merit God's favor by doing good things (like giving). Giving to God isn't the issue if you've never been saved. Yes, you should give to God, but if you do give it will be for the wrong motive—perhaps to impress people, or to impress God with your supposed "goodness," or to impress yourself by a gift that proves you are okay with God.

Listen carefully. Before you can give anything to God, you must first *receive from God*. Receive what? What God alone can give you—a new heart, forgiveness of sin, righteousness, His *salvation*. You must receive *before* you can give in a way that will please Him.

If you are a disciple of Christ, this is for you. Hear Jesus this morning. If you have received from God—a new heart, forgiveness, righteousness, salvation—you are responsible to give to God. Indeed, you will want to give to Him, not to earn His favor, but to show your appreciation for free favor and His matchless gifts to you.

Which brings us to the third mark of God's kind of giver...

3. *They give because they know they have received so much.* They give the Lord their treasure, time, and talents. And they do it with a joyful heart (2 Cor. 9:7).

Kent Hughes remarks, "When I write a check to the I.R.S., the I.R.S. does not care whether I give willingly or grudgingly. Not so with the Lord."^[12] As 1 Corinthians 13:3 states, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."

God does weigh our motives. He desires the giver as well as the gift.

Kent Hughes writes, "There is a disease which is particularly virulent in this part of the twentieth century. It is called cirrhosis of the giver. It was actually discovered about 34 A.D., and ran a terminal course in a couple named Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). It is an acute condition which renders the patient's hand immobile when it attempts to move from the billfold to the offering plate. The remedy is to remove the afflicted from the House of God, since it is clinically observable that this condition disappears in alternative environments such as golf courses or clubs or restaurants."

And then Hughes concludes, "Actually, the disease is really not a motor problem, but a heart problem. The best remedy is to fall in love with God with all your heart, for where your heart is, there will your treasure be (Matthew 6:21 reversed)."^[13]

Apparently, this widow never knew that Jesus was watching her. The text indicates Jesus commended her to the disciples, but there's no mention that He spoke to her. That conversation would take place later, when she in the Father's House would gaze into her Savior's loving eyes and hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, well done! Great is your reward in heaven! Come and enjoy!"

This story may fulfill another role in Mark's Gospel as a transition to what is about to follow. This widow gave her all. That's what Jesus is about to do, give His all as a sacrifice on a Roman cross.

So there they are, two very important lessons about spirituality. #1—What looks significant may not be at all. And #2—what looks insignificant may indeed be very significant.

Take Inventory: I can deceive others and myself, but not God.

Looks may be deceiving, but He knows the truth beloved. Let's be honest with ourselves.

****Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] R. Alan Cole, p. 270.

[2] [Moody's Anecdotes](#), p. 69.

[3] Barclay, p. 300.

[4] In Kent Hughes, p. 126.

[5] *Bits & Pieces*, November 12, 1992, pp. 19-20.

[6] Cole, p. 271.

[7] J. D. Jones, p. 485.

[8] J. D. Jones, p. 490.

[9] J. D. Jones, p. 491.

[10] Plummer, quoted in Wessel, p. 740.

[11] Barclay, p. 302.

[12] Kent Hughes, p. 132.

[13] Kent Hughes, p. 134.