

## Observations

We are nearing the end of the year which the church spends focusing on Mark's gospel. This was the first account of the life and ministry of Jesus which was recorded by early followers. There are several generalizations or observations which can be made about it as a narrative. There are certain events and teachings shared among the gospel narratives but there are differences as well especially in the presentation. An obvious difference of Mark is that it is the shortest gospel account. This is partly because Mark has no narrative about Jesus' birth or genealogy. Instead it begins with his baptism at the river Jordan. Despite the fact that throughout this narrative the disciples are presented as those most lacking in understanding of Jesus' identity, it also has the clearest opening statement about that identity: Verse one tells us that it is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is clear from the first words just who Jesus is. Then it tells us about Jesus' ministry, but largely does so through the recounting of deeds which Jesus does. He does teach but not with long discourses like the Sermon on the Mount. He uses parables, but not as extensively as Matthew and Luke. The focus is on how Jesus behaves and interacts with others. He asks a lot of questions of those who approach him, even often those who approach with a question he replies with a question instead of simply answering the question posed. Mark's presentation carries more urgency throughout. Today's passage is part of the larger set of passages that focus on Jesus' confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees in the Temple courtyard in the final days before his arrest. This confrontation has been presented by Mark as those groups trying to challenge Jesus' teachings as being blasphemous. Jesus has been "debating" with them about divorce, resurrection and other matters. Chapter 12:34b tells us "after that no one dared to ask him any questions." They had been unable to show a better understanding of their own beliefs. Then Jesus returns to teaching the large crowd that was listening to him "with delight" according to verse 37b. And what they are hearing is a challenge to the legitimacy of those religious leaders—those leaders have not understood the law they are supposed to be teaching and are not guiding the people according to God's commandments. That is the point at which today's text begins. Mark is careful to alert his audience when there is a change of scene. There is no such movement here—so we know that what we have before us today is said before not only the disciples and that large crowd but also those silenced scribes and Pharisees. What Jesus says, standing in the courtyard of the Temple is a deep and profound critique of those same temple authorities. Not too many days ago in this narrative, Jesus has entered the Temple courtyard and overturned the tables there declaring it had been made a den of robbers and thieves. The Temple authorities levied a tax on the people—all were required to pay it regardless of their economic status. The moneychangers whose activities had so enraged Jesus were there because of the Temple tax. The tax had to be paid with coins minted by the Jewish puppet monarchy, not the Roman coin which bore the likeness of Caesar. It is this demand for a Temple tax which seems to me to unite these seemingly different themes found in our text today. Because the first verses in this text are said as a warning to those around him about the character and actions of those religious leaders whom he has challenged as being hypocrites. "As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be

greeted with respect in the marketplace, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!” Jesus voicing his observations about the behavior of those in charge of seeing that God’s instructions for the people are followed. Keep in mind, just a few verses ago Jesus has described the two most important commandments of God and has endorsed the scribe whose question led to that description. The scribe’s answer included a statement that those commandments were much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices which were the business of the Temple. According to the Temple authorities the purpose of the Temple was to conduct the rituals—the rituals for those whole burnt offerings and sacrifices—and the execution of those things were what gave the priests and scribes their status in the culture. The description of the scribes behavior ends with “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” Early in the Scriptures of the Law there are many exhortations about the care of widows and orphans. Those instructions came out of the Law itself, those two commandments Jesus lifted up as the greatest. With these comments Jesus is continuing his criticism of the behavior of the religious leaders who are seeking status and honor for themselves. Jesus also here adds the comment “They will receive the greater condemnation.” This is also a theme from the message given through the prophets to Israel: because they had the knowledge—the benefit of God’s instructions, more was expected of them than of those who had not received God’s instructions. After giving these observations, Jesus proceeds to sit down opposite the treasury which is the place in the Temple where the Temple tax is collected and observes the activity there. He watches the crowd putting money into the treasury. We are told many rich people come and put in large sums. Then a poor widow comes and puts in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. This is usually lifted up as an example of sacrificial giving—a positive example of financial giving to be brought forth in connection with stewardship. Yet this scene is embedded in the previous text; the scene and audience has not really changed. So could it be that the connection to the widow’s actions lies in this verse about the religious structure and its leaders: “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance pray long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” The drama of the scene depicting the widow as it is usually described as an example of sacrificial giving is powerful. This is especially true against the backdrop of the scribes walking around in their long robes and garnering the respect of one and all. The contrast is hard to miss when Jesus tells his disciples, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” Could it be that Jesus points out this particular widow now as a living illustration of what he was just talking about that was seen in the behavior of the religious leaders and institution? The scribes walking around in long robes have plenty, while the widow only had two small coins to live on. The scribes are not seeing to the welfare of the widow. What Jesus has described in the behavior of the scribes and Pharisees is not unique to them; and it is not confined to past behaviors. The “walking about in long robes” may look a little differently today, but the desire of folks to present themselves in such a way as to “garner the respect and admiration of one and all” is still frequently visible. The plight of the widow—and the others in the society who were at the margins—was not noticed by those in authority. They had become invisible to those who were charged with their well-being. In Deuteronomy 10: 17 Israel was reminded: “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God,

mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribes.” Those long prayers for appearances sake are probably not what God looks at. Deuteronomy 10:18-19 continues: “who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Taken in the context in which the widow’s actions appear, when Jesus points out the widow, it seems likely that unlike us, he was not celebrating her giving. Instead, he is emphasizing that the Temple authorities, and the people at large, had completely missed the point of being God’s people. The giving was happening in the wrong direction. It was not the widow who needed to give to the Temple as if that would somehow validate her relationship with God. No: the Temple had a responsibility to the widow as one of those for whom God has specific and expressed concern. This observation about the widow highlights that point made by the scribe in verse 33 that loving God and neighbor is central and “much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” The size of the gift, the enormity of the sacrifice, the amount of the widow’s offering or ours does not buy relationship with God, for this comes to us freely through God’s love and grace. God has given to us the gift of Jesus freely, unconditionally. It is a gift which Hebrews 9:26 tells us Jesus: “has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.” That is God’s gift to us, but when we unwrap this gift of eternal life, life in all its fullness; life shared with God—it is also life to be shared with others. It is also a life in which we are called to follow God’s instructions for those relationships with others. Jesus sitting across from the Treasury made those observations. I wonder how differently our world would be if we all felt the presence of Jesus sitting and watching our daily routines. Would our actions be in keeping with God’s care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger among us? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.