

Mark 12.38-44

38 And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places 39 and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts,

Continuing his teaching, after getting more attention after his unique understanding of [Psalm 110:1](#) Jesus changes his subject of teaching to that of the scribes clothing and social interactions, telling the crowds listening to "Beware" of them which to us would mean to be on one's guard; to be cautious but in the greek this word is *blepo* meaning to see, discern, of the bodily eye. This interpretation shifts the focus slightly from direct warning ("beware") to a more observational, evaluative stance, suggesting a context where one should critically assess the scribes' actions rather than fear them outright. Jesus proceeds to describe how the scribes dress, how they like to be approached by others in public and how they position themselves in the social hierarchy at the synagogues and feasts.

"Scribes wore long robes, a mark of respect and their status as scholars. These robes signified religious importance, setting them apart in public and often accompanied by displays of piety that demanded respect."

(Keener, Craig S. The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament. InterVarsity Press, 1993, p. 164)

40 who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Jesus criticizes the scribes who "devour widows' houses," a phrase that takes on deeper meaning when understood against the historical and social context of first-century Judea. At that time, scribes were not only religious scholars but also legal experts who often provided counsel on managing estates.

"Scribes held significant influence over legal matters and could misuse this power by convincing widows to bequeath property to the Temple or for their own gain. Their services often carried hidden costs, which could result in the financial ruin of vulnerable individuals who depended on their legal guidance."

(Jeremias, Joachim. Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus. Fortress Press, 1969, p. 131)

He then exposes their long prayers as having a pretense, meaning they were not done for God but to appear holier than they were. Jesus is not criticising long prayers but the pretended cause behind it. This falsity of intention in prayer and abuse of legal authority means they will

“receive the greater condemnation” referring to that of judgement. They will receive a greater judgement than others because of their high status and legal authority reminiscent of his teaching in [Luke 12:48](#) “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.”

41 And he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny.

Jesus sits opposite the treasury, the location for monetary collection and observed those contributing to it, rich people putting in large amounts and a single poor widow giving two copper coins equal to a roman penny.

“The Treasury was located in the Court of Women, where thirteen trumpet-shaped chests were set up to receive contributions. These chests were designated for different purposes: some were for Temple upkeep, others for sacrifices, and still others for freewill offerings.”

(Edersheim, Alfred. The Temple: Its Ministry and Services. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994, p. 51)

The copper coins the widow put into the treasury is called a lepton. The *lepton* was a small, thin copper coin, and its value was minuscule compared to other coins in circulation, such as the silver denarius. Two *lepta* were worth approximately one-sixteenth of a denarius, which was a day's wage for a laborer.

43 And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.

Jesus gathers his disciples around him to use the widow as a living teaching subject for them, just as he had with the scribes in the previous verses. He begins with the famous “*Amen*” I say to you sometimes translated as “truly” this always proceeds a significant teaching. He tells them the poor widow has given more than all the others have given because they gave out of abundance but she gave out of poverty. God is pleased with sacrifice and although the rich may give more numerically, they are not sacrificing anything whereas the widow is giving everything she has.

Jewish law also required tithing—giving 10% of one’s produce or income to support the Levites, the poor, and the Temple ([Leviticus 27:30-32](#); [Deuteronomy 14:22-29](#)). In addition to mandatory contributions, there were various voluntary offerings, such as freewill offerings ([Deuteronomy 16:10](#)). The widow’s offering of two *lepta* could have been understood as a form of voluntary contribution, given that it was not a required amount but rather a personal act of faith and devotion. The purity of this act makes it more valuable to God than the people who

gave in order to appear as pure, linking back to the teaching he gave on the scribes in [Mark 12:38](#).