

# Exposing the Scribes -- Mark 12:35-40

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May 4, 2013

Please bow your heads with me for prayer.

*Lord, we praise You for the power that's in Your Word. We praise You for the mighty presence of the Holy Spirit here today. As we continue this journey through the book of Mark, we pray for a supernatural experience. May we be set free from slavery to addictions and our own self-centeredness. May we all connect with You in a real and meaningful way. We come for the glory of Jesus Christ, Amen.*

Today's story is a continuation of a conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of His day. The scribes and Pharisees had refused to accept Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. So by way of introduction we are going to consider what kind of Messiah the scribes were looking for. One of the key verses describing the work of the Messiah is found in Isaiah 2:4. It reveals what the Jews refer to as the Messianic Age. (Read) It sounds wonderful doesn't it? No more war, only peace. For years and years the Jews had looked for a Messiah to come and usher in this age of world peace. Over 150 years before Jesus was born many Jews found hope in a man named Judas Maccabeus. He was a priest from the lineage of Aaron. But he was also a great warrior. In fact he remains a hero in Jewish history alongside Joshua, Gideon, and David. Judas Maccabeus lived during the time when the Jews were ruled by the Greeks. A Greek ruler by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes had set up the worship of the Greek god, Zeus, (King of the gods) in the temple. To this day Antiochus Epiphanes is one of the most despised oppressors of the Jews, despised and hated. But Judas Maccabeus was their hero and Messiah who restored worship of the Lord. His battle cry was from Exodus 15:11, which says, "Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods?" The deliverance accomplished by Judas Maccabeus is still commemorated by the feast of Hanukkah. It is told that on this great day of deliverance the priests only had enough oil to burn in the menorah for one day. And yet, miraculously this oil lasted for eight days – just the time needed for more oil to be prepared.

So, as we look at this story in the book of Mark, keep the story of Judas Maccabeus in your minds. He was an example of the Messiah that the scribes were waiting for to usher in the messianic age, a time of world peace for the Jews.

Let's now consider a summary of our story from Mark 12:35-40:

*While Jesus was teaching, He posed a question regarding the scribes' teaching on the Messiah: "If the scribes' were right in saying that the Messiah was David's son, then why did David refer to the Messiah as his Lord?" Jesus then began to expose the scribes as men who were corrupted by selfish ambition and destined for a harsh judgment.*

We'll now look more closely at what Jesus experienced in this story. First of all, He experienced challenging a popular teaching. After undergoing a series of interrogations from the religious leaders, Jesus now turned the tables on His accusers. In Mark 12:35 Jesus shows a discrepancy between what the scribes have been saying about the Messiah, and what David says under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The scribes have labeled the Messiah as the "Son of David". And with that title came all the expectations of what that Messiah would do. A true "Son of David" would be like Judas Maccabeus. He would be a warrior! But Jesus uses David's own writings to paint a different picture of the Messiah. He quotes from Psalm 110:1. This was commonly accepted as a Messianic prophecy. In fact, verse 4 of Psalm 110 mentions that this Messiah would be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. And the writer of Hebrews clearly reveals in chapters 6 and 7 how Jesus, as the Messiah, is the one referred to here. Psalm 110:1 begins, "The LORD said to my Lord". In the Hebrew the first word translated, "LORD", is the word, "Yahweh" or "Jehovah". The second word translated, "Lord", is the more common word used by Jews for Lord, "Adonai". Most scholars interpret this passage as describing a conversation between God and His pre-incarnate Son.

God tells His Son to sit at His right hand, or right side. This would be the highest place of honor in the universe. Clearly, this "Lord" or "Messiah" is more than just a descendant of David. He is, in fact, far superior

to David. God goes on to tell His Son to stay seated until His enemies were made into a footstool for Him. One could interpret this to mean that God is telling His Son that one day He will be able to smear His enemies into the dirt. But this is not an interpretation that is faithful to the Hebrew. God's footstool is not a place of disgrace at all. In fact, David himself refers to the temple as God's footstool. In other places of the Old Testament God's footstool is a place of worship and even represents God's chosen people. Perhaps God is promising His Son that one day those who are His enemies will be converted and become temples for the Holy Spirit. Mark says that the common people (literally, "large crowd") were loving Jesus' teaching. They were listening with pleasure. It seemed as if He could say nothing wrong. His knowledge of Scripture and truth was far superior to anything they had ever heard from the scribes.

Now, we need to pause briefly before we go on. Otherwise we may miss the significance of what Jesus says next. In the book, Desire of Ages, Ellen White describes the emotions of the people at this time as "eager anxiety". What does she mean by that? Well, on one hand, the people continued to hold a great reverence for the scribes. On the other hand, they also were thoroughly impressed with this new Teacher, Jesus. The anxiety came from the fact that the scribes and Jesus were clearly at odds with each other. And it really bothered them that the scribes had so far refused to believe that Jesus had been sent from God. The following words of Jesus in Mark 12:38-40 were His attempt to break the people free from the powerful influence of the scribes.

So, now we see a second experience of Jesus: exposing corruption. According to Mark the words of Jesus in verse 38 of Mark 12 were a part of His "teaching". Jesus customarily taught "the way of God in truth" as the Pharisees had themselves confessed (Mark 12:14). But Jesus now chose to teach about "the way of the scribes in truth". He was going to show what the scribes were really made of. He began with the word, "Beware" (or "Watch out"). It was a call to take a closer look at the behavior of the scribes. In essence what He says in following is, "Their godliness is only a mask for selfish ambition." In Mark 12:38, 39 Jesus exposed the scribes' true passions. None of them have anything to do with God. Jesus first points out the scribes' love for "long robes". The significance here is not just that the robes were long, but that in wearing them they set the scribes apart from everybody else. We have special occasions when we wear distinguishing robes, such as at graduations, but the scribes wore these robes all the time. The robes worn by Catholic priests and cardinals are a modern example of clothing worn as a symbol of status.

Jesus also revealed the scribes' love for "greetings in the market places". The word that's translated "greetings" comes from a word meaning to "enfold in the arms". In Matthew's account of this same story (Matt. 23:7) he adds the detail that the people would say as a part of their greeting, "Rabbi, rabbi". It comes from a Hebrew word meaning, "my master" or "my great one". A third passion of the scribes was having the "best seats in the synagogues". At the front of the synagogue were seats assigned to those who were deemed distinguished. They faced the congregation, who either were sitting on the floor or standing. A fourth obsession of the scribes was having the "best seats at feasts". The word translated "feast" was the main meal of the day and would be like dinner for most people in our culture. When someone invited people over for dinner, the most distinguished place to sit was thought to be next to the host.

From here Jesus moved on to exposing a corrupt practice of the scribes. They devoured widows' houses. They would convince women who had lost their husbands (their source of income) to donate their land for the sake of the Temple. Nowhere did God require or expect this. It was simply a request from greedy scribes who only wanted to enrich themselves at the expense of helpless widows. James 1:27 says that "pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble...." But the scribes, instead of helping the widows in their distress, only took advantage of them. Jesus then exposed the scribes as people who were only pretending. Their "long prayers" were not with a desire to connect with God but simply a way of getting people's attention.

Jesus then closes with a sobering statement in Mark 12:40: "These will receive greater condemnation." In other words, "Judgment day will not be easy on the scribes." Their position of leadership as well as their corrupt, selfish ambitions would make things really hard for them in the judgment.

Now that we've looked at what Jesus experienced in this story, let's consider how this story speaks to our own experience. This story has been recorded so that we might know what God is like. But it has also been recorded so we might know how we should live as His followers. We will consider two ways in which Jesus is revealed in this story as our Example. The first way is that He challenged a popular teaching. This was not the first time Jesus had done this. In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is recorded as saying, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." Jesus repeated this six times in Matthew 5:21-48. The teaching that Jesus challenged was that the messiah was the son of David. This teaching was not heretical. It was distorted. Both Matthew and Luke spend considerable time showing how Jesus was a "Son of David" in their genealogies. (Matthew 1 and Luke 3) It was prophesied in Isaiah 11:1 that the Messiah would come from the lineage of Jesse, David's father. The distortion of this truth, though, came in the belief that any descendant of David could qualify as the Messiah. In their eyes a warrior like Judas Maccabeus was the prophesied Messiah. This is probably why Jesus referred to Himself as the "Son of Man", not as the "Son of David". There was another teaching, though, that the scribes had neglected to teach, and this was another source of their distortion. Jesus made reference to this teaching when He quoted from Psalm 110. The Messiah was not only a descendant of David but One vested with divinity, for David called Him "Lord". The source of most of the conflict between the scribes and Jesus was centered on this point. When Jesus claimed to be God's Son, in John 10, the scribes took up stones to throw at Jesus. And when in Matthew 26 Jesus accepted the title, "the Christ, the Son of God", they condemned Him to death as a blasphemer.

Do we have distorted teaching in the church today? Some Christians love the teaching found in Romans 6:14: "You are not under law, but under grace." And Romans 7:6 is just as good: "But now we have been released from the Law." These Scriptures are indeed true and full of hope. But when they are distorted, people start to say things like, "The law was done away with! You don't have to keep it! Those who keep the Ten Commandments are legalists and trying to be saved by keeping the Law." Other Christians love to quote verses like John 14:15, where Jesus says, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Another favorite verse of on this same thought would be James 2:10, which says, "Whoever shall keep the whole law and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all." These are Scriptures with wonderful truth. But those who have a distorted view of these verses have said, "It doesn't matter what you believe. If you aren't keeping the commandments, you'll be lost. In fact, you can keep all of the commandments. But if you go to church on Sunday, you're guilty of breaking the whole law!"

So what keeps us from having a distorted theology? Notice what Jesus did. He compared Psalm 110 with Isaiah 11. Isaiah 11 says the Messiah will come from the lineage of Jesse, David's father. Psalm 110 says the Messiah would be David's Lord. In other words, He would be fully man, but also fully God. What a wonderful truth this is! But if either of these Scriptures is left on its own, our view becomes distorted. Further, Jesus claimed that David's psalm is just as inspired as all the Messianic prophecies in Isaiah. Likewise, the Old Testament and New Testaments are equally inspired. Here's a couple Scriptures to keep in mind: Acts 17:11 – "These (the people in the city of Berea) were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." Notice also Isaiah 28:9, 10: "Whom will he teach knowledge? And whom will he make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts? For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little." Notice some pointers from these verses: (1) Receive God's Word as it reads with joy; (2) Test what people say with what the Bible says; (3) Understanding truth is like putting a puzzle together, not eating at a salad bar. Every piece and part of God's Word is important, essential, and equally inspired. We don't have the option of picking and choosing what verses fit our fancy.

Second of all, Jesus is revealed as our Example in this story in that He critiqued the religious leaders. Jesus was a keen observer of people. You get the sense in this story that He had really been watching the scribes closely. He observed what they did and found a common theme – pride and self-centeredness. He then formed a conclusion: "These men really aren't godly; they're corrupt." It would be well for us to follow Jesus' example in this. Now there's a difference between critiquing someone and judging someone. Most of us are probably familiar with Matthew 7:1, which says, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." But an equally valuable counsel is found in Matt. 7:15, 16. (Read) Notice the context for the phrase, "You will know them by their

fruits", is "false prophets" or religious leaders. God wants us to critique our spiritual leaders, so we won't be led astray. What might contemporary "scribes" look like today? Here's a few modern parallels to Jesus' description of the scribes in Mark 12: (1) Always in a suit (even at social); (2) Insist on being referred to as "Pastor" or "Elder"; (3) Unwilling to preach off of the platform; (4) Limit association to people of esteem; (5) Ask people to go into debt to support their ministries; (6) Use KJV language and repeated use of "Lord" in prayer. Now this doesn't mean that if a pastor insists on preaching behind the pulpit, he is corrupt or a false prophet. It might just mean that he is nervous up front and likes to hide behind something. But if you notice that a leader of a ministry meets the criteria for most of these identifiers, then that should be a warning to you to beware.

In closing, I would like to say a word to the selfish and the proud. No, I'm not going to point any fingers. This is all of us. Philippians 2:21 says that we all look for what is best for ourselves. This is true of anyone who is a descendant of Adam. We all have a sinful nature that is self-centered. So, this final Scripture is one that I need just as much as you. Please turn with me to James 4:10. (Read) Now is not the time to be occupied with our own status or position. That time will come, though. The Lord will be the One to do it. In fact, Revelation 7:13, 14 says that He will give us all robes of distinction. And Revelation 3:21 assures us that one day Jesus will invite us to sit at His right hand, the highest place of honor in the universe. But now is the time to serve one another (Galatians 5:13). And according to Romans 12:10, as far as honor goes, we should give preference to each other. Our closing song is entitled, "Not I, but Christ". If it is your desire to live your life for the honor of Christ and the hiding of yourself, please stand with me.