

# The Real Problem of Jesus' Opponents

## Mark 12:35-44

### Introduction

A friend of mine who I studied with had previously served in the Army as both a paratrooper and in Army intelligence. Mike tells me about going to a pub one night with some friends and in walked Gordon Tallis. A friend of Mike, who had drunk perhaps a little too much, said he was going to go up to Tallis and challenge him. Mike's friend walked up to Talis and said, "You're not so tough. I can take you. Why don't you step outside." Gordon apparently lent over to say something and Mike's friend returned to Mike and his friends.

Mike asked, "What happened? What did he say?"

His friend replied, "Talis just said, 'Wake up to yourself son.' and then I realised how big he is ... and how small I am compared to him."

I wonder if some of the opponents of Jesus were thinking, before he answered all their questions, "Jesus ain't so smart! We can take him down a peg or two. Let's show the crowds that we're the big boys when it comes to understanding God properly." Likewise, as Jesus answered all their questions and then proceeded to ask questions which they couldn't answer that they started to say to themselves, "Look how smart he is. Look at his honesty and integrity. I wonder if we've bitten off more than we can chew here?"

This morning we're going to look at how Jesus moves from responding to his opponents questions to making his opponents struggle. The way in which Jesus challenges his opponents also serves to challenge us too.

### They Didn't Understand God's Word As Much As They Thought They Did (vv. 35-37)

The first question that Jesus asks is about understanding Psalm 110, which was read to us. Pretty much all the teachers of the law understood this to be a Psalm

written by David but it was also regarded as a messianic psalm (a Psalm about the coming Messiah) and this is what created the question Jesus asked. “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: ““The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”” David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?”

The question is clear, how can the Messiah be both David’s son as well as having a greater honour and standing such that even David calls him Lord? On first appearance it may appear that Jesus is simply playing a game of theological one-upmanship, putting the teachers in their place, and the crowd certainly enjoyed this. Maybe the Jews are similar to Australians where they like to see the tall poppies cut down?! Having probably regularly witnessed the unsubtle posturing of the teachers of the law such a reaction is very understandable.

However, more than just causing the teachers of the law to recognise the limitation of their knowledge of God’s Word, Jesus is also making an important point here. William Lane writes about this very clearly and so I’ll quote him here, “The point made is that David himself distinguished between his earthly, political sovereignty and the higher level of sovereignty assigned to the Messiah. The Messiah is not only ‘son of David’; he is also, and especially, his Lord. His role is not to restore on earth the Davidic kingdom or the sovereignty of Israel. He does not simply extend the work of David, but comes to establish a wholly different Kingdom, the throne of which is situated at God’s right hand.” (William L. Lane, *NICNT - Mark*, 1974, p. 437-438)

The first challenge then, for Jesus’ listeners as well as for ourselves, is do we recognise the radical nature of the Kingdom which Jesus came to establish. Do we still look for influence in politics and the world or are we seeing God’s kingdom coming in transformed lives?

### They Engaged In Hypocrisy (vv. 38-40)

It is about this challenge of looking for external markers of influence and success which Jesus next proceeds to address.

As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

Jesus points out how the teachers of the law determined success and that was through wearing noticeable clothing and to receive public recognition of their status and position as those who understood God’s law. They would say long prayers but this wasn’t because they wanted to spend more time talking to their Father in Heaven but rather they wanted others to notice their prayers. This behaviour is all about the teachers’ standing before others instead of their standing before God.

To make matters worse, we’re told that the teachers “devour widows’ houses.” What does that mean? There is some talk that this refers to a person arranging, probably through the providing of a gift, for a teacher to use his position of authority to remove a widow’s rights to owning her own property and pass that on to the person who’s made the request. This would mirror times in our day when we have doctors sign off on power of attorney or authorise that a person is of sound mind so that a will can be changed and this is done to the benefit of the doctor’s friend.

While this is especially unpleasant, it doesn’t even necessarily have to be as extreme as this. Jesus is here talking about the desire for the teachers of the law to have a high standing in society and to receive recognition. It was common, and indeed expected, for people to invite teachers of God’s law into their homes as a way of expressing their appreciation of their service as well as being blessed by the teaching they provide. It may be then that the problem which Jesus is highlighting is that the teachers of the law overstayed their welcome in widows’ homes to the point where the teachers put the widows under financial strain. For the sake of their desire to receive public recognition they will cause harm to others. Such behaviour from anyone is bad but, as representatives of God, they are dishonouring of Yahweh and so they will indeed be deserving of sever punishment.

As a pastor in God's church I particularly feel this challenge from Jesus. I remember soon after I started working as a youth worker I went out for a meal with a friend and reached for my wallet and my friend, also a Christian, said, "No mate. You work for the church now, you'll never pay for another meal." As much as I appreciate people's generosity I challenged myself to never expect such generosity and conversely I would strive to be generous to others.

Jesus' words though are not only directed towards leaders. Jesus words should challenge all of us whenever we find ourselves wanting to get some sort of social standing because of our connection to the church or a role that we take. Yes, this is less of an issue today in our broader society because the church no longer commands the authority which it once did but there's still some areas where the church has some pull and we may be tempted to desire recognition. May we resist this temptation and instead strive to work on our personal relationship with God.

### Their Hearts Weren't In It (vv. 41-44)

Working on our own relationship with God will mean that we grow in faith to the point where know that God can be trusted with all that we are and all that we have. Jesus illustrates this with an observation he makes when seeing people give money at the temple treasury.

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

I know a number of churches traditionally use plates to take up the offering and some people have commented, "I much prefer bags because then people don't know what I'm giving." In all honesty I'm probably like that too but how would you feel in this situation? Jesus is making watching people give into a spectator sport.

People may have been giving large amounts of money to gain the respect or possibly even the envy of the crowds, but desire for public recognition isn't the focus of Jesus' teaching on this occasion. This section naturally builds upon what has gone before because the emphasis is on what a genuine trust in God looks like when all the external markers and publicity is removed.

Jesus highlights the widow's action here as a wonderful irony. In one very obvious sense the widow has given less than anyone else, only a couple of copper coins which were worth a tiny amount (obviously before copper rose in value with it being used in wiring!) but Jesus declares, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

Here is someone who truly trusts in Yahweh. The widow trusts God with all that she is and all that she has. Had the widow only given one copper coin she would still have given 50% of what she had to God, but she holds nothing back, giving her all.

What does it mean to give God all we have? What would our church look like if we didn't hold anything back from God?

Jim Elliot was a missionary to the natives of South America where he was martyred. Jim's death, together with the deaths of most of the men in the team, stirred the hearts and souls of many young people in the Western World, particularly in the United States, and was used by God to raise up a new generation of missionaries. Jim Elliot had written in his journal, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

But what would it look like for us? We may indeed see some of the best in our church go off and be missionaries for the sake of God's glory and for the love of those who have never heard about Jesus. But not all of us will go and there is a massive calling right here before us in the Lockyer Valley. What might God be wanting to do in and through us if only he had our all?

Over the past twelve months or so I've been praying about what God might want to do in and through us as a church but which will require that we give God our

very best and hold nothing back. Here are some of my thoughts but I encourage you to pray about this yourself. Pray about what God might want to do in and through you, and also for us as a church, a community committed to knowing Jesus and making Jesus known through the power of the Spirit.

My prayer and dream is that we are not just a church which survives here in the Lockyer Valley but that we thrive. We thrive because our identity is in being God's church; we thrive because we know Jesus and the truth of the gospel, the good news of what Jesus has accomplished for us, and the hope which this message brings; and we thrive because we serve in the power of the Holy Spirit who also illuminates our reading of God's Word.

As a thriving church we will reach out into our communities displaying the character of Jesus and sharing his great message in ways which meet needs of those around us. I know that God has given various members of our church particular burdens for segments of our community. For myself, I pray about how we can connect with children and youth.

As a thriving church we will not only reach out but also build up. We won't have just two home groups but there will be multiple groups where lives are shared, prayer comes naturally and God's word is studied. This building up will grow and continue to the point where we train up new leaders and pastors who will not only bless our church but God's church more broadly.

This is just some of my vision of what God would do in and through us if he has all of us. What's your vision for yourself and our church when God has all of you?

## Conclusion

In conclusion though, remembering Jesus' words here and his challenge to the teachers of the law, if we are a thriving church we will be characterised by humility before Christ, having lives which have been genuinely changed on the inside because we trust our Heavenly Father with all that we are and all that we have.