

## A Sermon for DaySpring

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*What to Watch*

Mark 12.38-44

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Gospel stories have a way of inviting us to come inside them and walk around for a little while. We don't just stand outside them as casual readers; we are drawn inside where once we are there, we then begin to get our bearings, start to make sense of what's happening around us, and then, if we're paying attention, get a glimpse at how God makes sense of us and the world. In today's story, we're dropped into a scene in which we can see how God sees things, which is good news anytime you're living in a time you are trying to make sense of.

We begin by finding ourselves sitting with Jesus. Dropped into this scene as we are, we don't actually see him; we don't see his face; he's just off-view, just off-screen. But it's him. You can tell just by his presence and how you feel differently when he's near. We're with him, and there is a large crowd all around. That's the first thing we notice. We're kind of off to the side of the crowd, not right in the middle of things. We're against a wall where you can stand without getting in anyone's way, or kneel down, which is what we're doing, without getting run over by absent-minded passers-by. We're crouching down with him, like we're watching, waiting, observing everyone and everything that happens, as if what we might see at any moment may have cosmic meaning, even though it's an ordinary day.

Jesus did this kind of thing a lot. He'd just stop to watch and listen. To individuals, he would listen to what they said: the questions they asked, the faith they professed. He could also listen to what people meant behind what they said. He had this way of doing that—of drawing out the truth from people.

He would watch crowds, too, like this one in front of us in this scene we've been dropped into. He watched how crowds flowed like waves. He could sense danger, which isn't to say he always ran away from it, but he knew just what a crowd needed in the moment--some teaching, a word of wisdom, comfort in hard times, bread and fish for empty bellies. Sometimes, they needed a target, and ultimately, he became that, too.

He would watch trees, too, and birds, gazing intently. He would offer spiritual wisdom from something that to his disciples really didn't look all that interesting. A mustard seed? A fig tree? Kind of boring, really. But he could make it into something. He had a way of seeing what the rest couldn't see in creation, in other people, in ourselves, and in his purpose.

It makes sense that in this scene we crouch down and wait with him. It's like we've been through this before with him. So we start to pay attention. What's the scene before us? It's a marketplace. That becomes clear. People buying and selling, trading. Sellers post up under shade cloths, inviting potential customers to their wares. The waft of smoke from grilled meats rises overhead. The sizzle of the grill. The laughter of friends, the clink of

coins. A lively marketplace. A meeting place of our collective economic and individual financial futures worked out in the mundane exchanges that make possible our daily bread. In and through all these interactions, we see it's a marketplace. This place is about money.

It's also a marketplace of ideas. That's what we call it these days. In those days in some places, they called it an agora. Some were organized, formal debate societies about high-minded ideals and philosophies; most of the time it was just two guys with high spirits and heads full of opinions going at it in the middle of the street. All around the marketplace are groups of people debating positions on issues. You can't hear from where we are sitting exactly what they are saying. Maybe that's part of the point of sitting where we are, off to the side, out of the way. You can watch them but can't exactly hear them. No matter, after all, aren't debates the same as they ever were--about what policy should be taken toward some issue. Everyone cares about their kids; everyone cares about their security; everyone cares about the food they drink and water, and most people, believe it or not, care about their neighbors. People argue for what they care about. That's called politics. We see now. This place where we are with Jesus is about money. And it's about all the politics.

One thing we notice, as we're paying attention to this, is that after the steam billowing from their ears, fingers pointing, tongues wagging, dust kicking up all around them... those same people, just as often, hug one another, give one of those affectionate pats on the cheek, "How's your Mama? Good? See you tomorrow." From where we are sitting, it's hard to see who won the argument. It's hard to see that it exactly mattered more than the friendship. It's in friendship that they seem to be able to see that sometimes the other person even has a point. In this scene, we become really interested in these dynamics—in all the politics and conversations and friendships and exchanges taking place right before us.

Still, for all of this, Jesus doesn't say a word. He's like that sometimes. He doesn't speak for long periods. He just watches, taking it all in, this teeming hum of human life. That's not the way he is all the time. Sometimes, he's right out in the middle of things, drawing all attention to himself. That makes his disciples nervous and us, too. We think it's better if he stays quiet like he is now. But then, that makes us more nervous. What does he see that we don't see? What are we missing? We look again.

Ah, we realize, this isn't just a neighborhood agora, it's the courtyard in Jerusalem. We're at the Temple Square. How could we not notice that before? Forest for the trees and all that, I suppose. But of course, that's where we are—we're in Mark 12. You can even see it, crouched down here. This is the scene. The courtyard square is laid out between the temple and the palace, the altar of worship, and the throne of empire. Wow. What big stones! What marvelous buildings! Money! Religion! Power! All right before our eyes. It's hard to see anything else. It really is. When Money, Politics, Religion, Power is in front of you, bright, loud, big, you can't crouch low enough; you can't lean back far enough to see around or beyond it. That's exactly the point of it.

As if to emphasize this, just at this moment, there's a stirring in the crowd as a group of long-robed scribes stride confidently across the center of the courtyard. Honestly, it's kind of cool to be there when they come by. They're like national celebrities. Ah, here come the scribes, very demure, very mindful. They're what happens when money, politics, religion, and power become sentient and start walking around. That's them. They're the walking-around version of the bricks and stones and system. And when they show up, it's like all the oxygen in the place got sucked into their lungs, and all the noise and all the light, like a new gravitational force had emerged in the cosmos, drawing all things until itself. And our eyes went with it. Confess the truth: all our eyes went with it, and our attention, something like worship, all of it was drawn out of our mortal bodies and set on a course to be consumed by these majestic creatures... who don't even know we exist.

For the first time, Jesus speaks--which was startling because, for a little while, we forgot he was even here. He is so still and so quiet, and the carnival before us is so big and loud. The first thing he says is a word of caution. He's not nearly as impressed as we are with everything that's put in front of us. "Watch out for those kinds of guys. They make long prayers and love the best seats... Watch out for them--they'll take everything they can get from you. They'd take the house of a widow if they can get it."

I confess, it's easy sitting there, crouched down with Jesus against that wall, watching this scene, hearing his concern. All of this to conclude the wrong thing, and then do the wrong thing. It's a common thing, but it's the wrong thing. The wrong thing to conclude, remember we're in Mark 12—almost at the end—the wrong thing is that Jesus is looking at the scribes and the whole scene and is telling us to get out our swords because now it's time to go kick out the scribes and become the new and better Money! Religion! Power!

And yes, we confess, this idea stirs us! It stirs us! Yes! We are here at the intersection of all things that matter, with people that matter, big stones and big people and big ideas. It's time. Jesus is saying it's time for the Messiah to be made known, after 11 chapters of the Messianic secret. It's now time.

Thy Kingdom come, right? Come right now? It's tempting to believe that this whole thing before us is what he wants he just wants it better, nicer, kinder, purer, or something, as long as it's ours. It's very easy to think that sitting there. We're here in this courtyard for a reason right, between the temple and palace. May your kingdom come! May it come now! Let's go take it! We start to rise up with energy and anger and righteousness flowing in our veins, staring those power people down.

It is then we notice that he's not even looking anymore at what we're focused on. Not at the height of the temple, not at the gilded palace, nor the power players—no matter which direction they came onto the courtyard, left or right. Follow the eyes of Jesus, and you'll see that have found a poor widow, alone amongst the crowd and the noise. It's as if he came here, and we came here today for a divine appointment with her. She walks slowly but with purpose. She walks to the big ol' treasury box, big as the world. She pulls out two little worthless coins, the kind you give your kids to throw in the fountain at the mall.

Between her slender fingers are two coins. She drops them in the box and turns and walks away. And that's it. And she's gone, disappeared back into the crowd who hardly noticed her at all.

And for a second time, Jesus speaks, "Look at her. She's done something more than all these other people have done all day or maybe will with all their lives. She gave everything she had to live on." We can see that he saw himself in her. No one else even saw her. We would have missed her, too, were it not for the eyes of Jesus. He not only saw her, he saw himself in her.

And in his eyes, we finally see something we'd just about, just almost forgotten. The scribes—and those like them who have power and use it--will come and go. Those there now will be replaced by those yet to come and those after them. The scribes are not the kingdom. And all the money that flows will come and go. Economies grow and change. Fortunes rise and fall. The economy is not the kingdom. Power will ebb and flow. Empires will never cease raging. Human power and politics are not the kingdom.

But somewhere in the midst of them, there will always be one: overlooked, disregarded. There will be one--rejected, alone. There will be one that the system and its people overlook, and there is the kingdom of God: in the small that is mighty, the weak that is strong, the foolish that is wise, the helpless that helps, the hopeless that finds hope, at Bethlehem and Calvary, and all places and with all people, we miss seeing if we let ourselves get consumed by the big and loud.

The day is over, and we stand to leave the courtyard. As we do, we turn to look at him full in the face for the first time. He has a look on his face—different than it's been—it's the face of resolve. It's gentle but firm. He has a mission, and his eyes are set on it. It will be costly, but he is ready. Today, by Jesus bringing us with him into this courtyard of the teeming mass of the moment, we close our eyes and reset our vision so inflamed by what's been before us. And when we open them, by God's grace, we can see as he sees. Jesus is a widow-woman who gives everything she has to live on. That doesn't look like much compared to everything else in front of us. But it's everything. It's everything that matters.

What a gospel story. It invites us into it, and like all gospel stories, sends us out, to be God's people in the world. The day is over, and we stand to leave the courtyard and prepare to step out of the story. As we prepare to get up and go, I hear him whisper what sounds like a blessing on all of us, "Keep your eyes on me. I give all I have, even to death. You will not be alone. I am with you. And what you do in my name and for my sake and in my spirit matters more than all the sound and fury of the world. Keep your eyes on me. Your hope, your faith is in me, and I am trustworthy. And I will lead you on. You are my church."

Amen.