

Introduction

1. During the War of 1812, the United States Navy defeated the British Navy in the Battle of Lake Erie. Master Commandant Oliver Perry wrote to Major General William Henry Harrison, "We have met the enemy and they are ours."
 - a. Walt Kelly, creator of the classic comic strip Pogo the Opossum, created a parody of this famous battle report for an anti-pollution Earth Day poster in 1970. Concerning the pollution problem, Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!" Kelly's parody of this famous battle report perfectly summarizes mankind's tendency to create our own problems.
 - b. We all like to think that we have everything in our spiritual house in order, and many of you may be doing a good job following the lead of Jesus as you daily take up your cross and follow Him.
 - c. However, we all need to be reminded that we are each one a sinner saved by grace and must never lord our salvation or kingdom service over others either inside or outside the body of Christ.
 - d. Perhaps a better way of expressing Pogo's sentiment of pride and self-destruction comes from Proverbs: "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Pr 16:18).
2. Daniel Akin writes, "One of the most dangerous vocations in life is being a theologian. One of the most dangerous places you can go is to a Bible-believing church that faithfully proclaims the gospel. Each time you hear God's Word taught, your accountability before Him increases. Tragically, those who often receive God's revelation and traffic in His truth become deaf, even hardened. Rather than walk humbly, they become proud. Having drawn so near to Jesus, they think and act nothing like Jesus. God will not overlook such hypocrisy and sin" (Daniel Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 296).
3. In the three verses of this lesson, Jesus gave an important warning to all of us about living selfish, self-righteous lives as self-proclaimed members of God's kingdom.

**4. Read Mk 12:38-40.****A. The Warning** (38-40a)

1. Jesus was still teaching in the temple courts in Mark's narrative (cf., Mk 12:35).
2. The debate over four questions between Himself and the leaders of the Jews (i.e., Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and teachers of the law) had just concluded, and no one had any more questions for Jesus.
 - a. The warning in this passage echoes this one, "'Be careful, . . . Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod,'" which Jesus spoke to His disciples in Mk 8:15 at end of His first series of confrontations with the Jewish leaders.
 - b. Matthew include a longer denunciation of the Jewish leaders in Matthew 23, and Luke has one that is nearly identical to Mark's (cf., Lk 20:45-47).
 - c. The ability and integrity of the teachers of the law had just been called into question by their failure to answer Jesus' question about the meaning of David's words in Psalm 110 (cf., Mk 12:35-37).
 - d. Jesus addressed the suspect teaching and practices of many of the Jewish leaders, but not all of the Jewish leaders fell under this warning. Remember that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea appear to have responded to Jesus' teaching and to have possibly become followers of Jesus.
3. Jesus openly issued this warning to His hearers, which would have included the Jewish leaders and the common people gathered in the temple court: "Watch out (Gk., *blepete*) for the teachers of the law (Gk. *grammaton*)" (38a).
 - a. Remember that the Jewish leaders, as epitomized by the teachers of the law, had for the most part been deceitful and hypocritical in their words and actions toward Jesus.
 - b. They had showered Him with words of praise (cf., Mk 12:14,19) but had carefully crafted three questions that they hoped would trip Him up and cause trouble for Him with either the Roman authorities or the common people.
 - c. Only the teacher of the law who asked Jesus the third question, concerning which was the greatest commandment of God, appeared to have asked his question with sincerity based on Jesus' conclusion that he was ". . . not far from the kingdom of God" (Mk 12:34).

4. Jesus told the people and the Jewish leaders to watch out for six actions of the Jewish leaders that revealed their true hearts and motivations.
- a. They craved recognition. Jesus said, “They like (Gk., *thelonton*) to walk about in flowing robes (Gk. *stolais*)” (38b1).
 - 1) They wore long white robes symbolizing purity and left colors to the common people.
 - 2) They covered themselves with a *tallit*, a Hebrew prayer shawl with long tassels, denoting their piety in prayer.
 - b. They demanded respect. Jesus said, “They like to . . . be greeted with respect (Gk., *aspasmous*) in the marketplaces” (38b2)
 - 1) James Brooks notes, “The greetings in the marketplaces were not ordinary greetings but expressions of deference to a religious authority” (James Brooks, *Mark*, 202).
 - 2) William Lane adds, “By the majority of the people the scribes were venerated with unbounded respect and awe. Their words were considered to possess sovereign authority. When a scribe passed by on the street or in the bazaar people rose respectfully. . . . there is evidence that in the first century A.D. the designation ‘Rabbi’ was undergoing a transition from its former status as a general title of honor to one reserved exclusively for ordained scribes” (William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 40).
 - c. They wanted to be first. Jesus said, “They like to . . . have the most important seats (Gk., *protokathedrias*) in the synagogues” (39a1).
 - 1) Brooks notes, “These ‘most important seats in the synagogues’ were on the bench facing the congregation and in front of the chest that contained the biblical scrolls” (Brooks, 202).
 - 2) They obviously weren’t Baptists, since they wanted to be on the front row!
 - d. They wanted to be honored. Jesus said, “They like . . . the places of honor (Gk., *protoklisias*) at banquets” (39a2).
 - 1) Brooks notes, “The ‘places of honor at banquets’ were on the right and left of the host or at least at his table” (Brooks, 202).
 - 2) They wanted to be first, like James and John, when they asked Jesus, “. . . Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (Mk 10:37).
 - 3) They did not want to be last, and the least of their brothers as Jesus commanded when He said, “. . . Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mk 9:35).
 - e. They preyed on the weak. “They devour widows’ houses” (40a1)
 - 1) Some of the primary commands of God in the OT concern care for widows, orphans, and foreigners—the weak and vulnerable.
 - 2) Isaiah writes, “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless” (Isa 10:1-2).
 - 3) Brooks notes, “Exactly what was involved in devouring widows’ houses is uncertain. The scribes were forbidden to receive payment for their teaching. They either had to support themselves with secular employment (cf., Paul’s practice) or had to be dependent upon gifts (again, cf. Paul). Such a situation easily led to undue expectation of gifts. Some may have ingratiated themselves to widows in hopes of being willed their houses, or they may have found technicalities in the law whereby they could lay claim to the houses of defenseless persons, such as widows. They may have ‘expected’ generous sums from credulous widows for praying for them (note the reference to prayer). The reference might not be to personal gain but to exactions for the benefit of religious institutions. Again, such abuses were not confined to Judaism but have been common in the Christian ministry throughout the history of the church” (Brooks, 202).
 - 4) Whatever the circumstances, they were not loving their neighbors as commanded in Lev 18:19 as amplified by Jesus’ instruction in Mk 12:31.

f. They had a self-righteous, false piety. “They . . . for a show make lengthy prayers.” (40a2)

1) It is not what you say or how you say it to God; It is the heart from which the prayer flows.

2) Jesus amplified this point as recorded in Matthew 23 when He said, ““Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Mt 23:27).

3) James affirms that contra to the prayers of the self-righteous teachers, “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (Jm 5:16b).

5. These six actions of the Jewish leaders reveal a selfish, self-righteous life.

6. You can tell me what you believe with your words, but you show me what you truly believe by your actions.

B. The Verdict (40b)

1. Jesus delivered a final word of judgment on the selfish, self-righteous Jewish leaders: “These men will be punished (Gk., *lempsontai perissoteron*) most severely (Gk., *krima*)” (40b).

a. Daniel Akin notes, “The greater our revelation, the greater our accountability. To know what is right and not do it invites ‘the harsher punishment in judgment.’ No wonder James would write in James 3:1, ‘Not many should become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive a stricter judgment.’” (Akin, 297).

b. Warren Wiersbe concludes, “If a person is ‘important’ only because of the uniform he wears, the title he bears, or the office he holds, then his ‘importance’ is artificial. It is *character* that makes a person valuable, and nobody can give you character; you must develop it yourself as you walk with God” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, 143).

2. William Lane notes, “This certain denunciation of scribal practices concludes the Marcan account of Jesus’ public ministry. The incident which follows, like the Olivet discourse, centers in teaching directed to the disciples. By terminating the public ministry with this account the evangelist points to the sharp opposition between Jesus and the Jewish authorities which led inevitably to events recalled in the passion narrative” (Lane, 441).

3. A corollary to Pr 16:18, that was cited at the beginning of this study, is Pr 18:12: “Before a downfall the heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor.”

a. We have seen in today’s lesson the predicted downfall of the haughty hearts of the teachers of the law.

b. In our next study we will examine the humble heart of a widow who is honored by Jesus above all others.

C. Questions/Thoughts for Reflection

1. Take an honest look at your actions so far this week. Do they reveal that you are living your life more like Jesus or the Jewish leaders?

2. What needs to change in your life so that you are less selfish and self-righteous?

3. Who in our church or the community are you better than?

a. Why do you think you are better?

b. Are you?

c. Thank Jesus for saving you from your sin, selfishness, and self-righteousness.

4. What do you need to do this week to show others that you love them with the love of Jesus?