

Announcements:

1. Today is a busy day
 1. Lawn and Waterslide Day till 2pm
 2. Women's Coffee Talk
 3. Men's Field Day (cancel??)
2. Youth Summer Camp—leave tomorrow; prayer
3. Church Membership — September 5
4. Church Picnic — Aug 8 @ Marsha's
5. VBS — Aug 9-13

Beware Mark 12:38-40

Beware is a word we see and for most of us it grabs our attention. When you walk up to a house and see a sign that says, "Beware of dog" it gets your attention and puts you on alert.

Driving up river there are yellow signs with an arrow that curves on them, these are signs that tell the driver, "Beware there is a curve ahead." It causes you to pay attention.

While on vacation in Colorado, Tami and I were coming back home to Southern California. We took a cutoff that would drop us down across the top of the Grand Canyon. It's 11 o'clock at night and we were driving on this two lane road. We never saw a car on that road...should have been my first clue.

The first few miles of the road everything was nice. It was flat, straight, and the brush on the sides of the road was cut neatly. As we went, the brush and grass got taller and taller, and encroached more and more onto the roadway until there was no shoulders left. About 15 miles into this road was a huge, yellow sign that said "Curves ahead, 15 mph". That grabbed my attention, so I slowed down some waiting for the curve to show up in my headlights. After a minute and no curve, I sped back up some.

After another mile or two, I saw another huge sign that said, "Curves ahead, 15 mph, beware of dropoff". This really got my attention. I slowed down some getting ready for a curve I couldn't see because of the tall brush on the side of the road. Nothing. I sped back up. I see a third sign that says, "Sharp curves ahead, 15 mph, steep grade" and then shortly

after that I see a big sign that says “Sharp curves. Steep grade. Use lower gears. Beware of dropoff”. And then another sign that says “Pavement ends”. Now my attention is grabbed, but yet not really believing anything I am seeing. We start driving over those little rumble strips and there it is. The signs were not lying. The pavement came to an end and we drove on a very steep grade, down a non-paved barely two-lane road that were switchbacks down the face of a cliff that dropped a long ways down into a valley that met back up to the paved highway road that continued on.

Signs are important. Jesus, during His last few days in Jerusalem, while in the temple, said, “Beware of these teachers of religious law.” What was the issue of teachers of religious law? They were full of spiritual pride which led to great hypocrisy. As much as this is a warning about religious leaders, it’s also a warning for all of us.

Let’s look at our passage this morning. Let’s read Mark 12:38-40.

I would like to ask this question up front: Do you have spiritual pride? Maybe you don’t know. Here are a couple questions to get us thinking: Do you find yourself having all the spiritual answers to people’s problems? It could be an issue of spiritual pride
Do you have an expectation of something in return when you give or serve?
Do you worry more about how people see you ‘as a Christian’ then how God sees you?
Do you find yourself thinking you have to act and be a certain way ‘in church’, but act a different way out of church?
Do you find yourself comparing yourself to those ‘bad people’ and thinking you are not as bad as them?
Do you find yourself doing the things you tell your kids or others not to do?

(Disclaimer: What these questions are not meant to do are get you to stop pointing people towards God because you have failures too, or for you to stop going to church or serving, or maybe acting or speaking the way you do ‘out there’ because you are in a church or want people to see you as a put together Christian so you just act or speak like you do ‘out there’ in here.). My hope is we take a realistic look at our own life and put to death the things that make us hypocrites.

Let's look at our passage.

Let's briefly look at six symptoms of spiritual pride in our passage.

The first is this: 'They parade around in long robes'. The common person typically wore a robe that was knee length, and if it had any fringing on it, it was typically minimal. These religious leaders wore robes that were long, white, and had long tassels on them. These robes distinguished them from others.

Numbers 15:37-41 says, "The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God.'" What is the issue if they were following this Old Testament law? The issue was the motive. This wasn't to honor God and make much of Him. It was to get them recognized. It wasn't because of conviction, it was because of the perception they wanted others to have. They wanted others to see how devout they were.

The second symptom is this: 'receiving respectful greetings'. In Matthew 23, a much more in depth warning Jesus gives about these religious leaders, Matthew says they were called "Rabbi" (which means 'master' or 'teacher') and they were called "Father". Disciples would sometimes call their Rabbi "father". Matthew 23:8-9 says, "Don't let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. And don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,' for only God in heaven is your Father."

The issue wasn't they were given a title of respect or a title that describes a role they play, but to set them a part for the purpose of showing their superiority above others; it created a hierarchy. It was no longer about the role and honoring God in that role, it became about the perks they received from the role. And likewise, disciples were not to put their rabbi's on a pedestal and make them out to be God-like and what they say God's words. Jesus said, "for you only have one teacher, and all of you are equal

as brothers and sisters.” Are pastors, Sunday school teachers, and elders or deacons greater? Not necessarily. They have a function, a role to play to help the church be built up and grow up in Christ. They have an authority, yes, but it isn’t an authority on their merit, it is an authority given by Christ, to be placed under the leadership of Christ, dictated by Christ, administers in the love and grace of Christ. It is for the purpose of reflecting who Christ is. As John the Baptist said in John 3:30, “[Jesus] must become greater. I must become less.”

The third symptom of spiritual pride we see in our passage is: ‘having the best seats in the synagogue.’ This was about their status. These seats were seats in the front that faced the congregation and would be seen clearly by the congregation. These were seats closest to the ark that held the scrolls of scripture. These were seats that revealed not only their authority, but also their superiority. The religious leaders were educated and spent much time in the scriptures. They were the aristocrats. They were leadership. They took the seats of importance to show their importance, not because it was to signify, “here we are so you can know who to come to for greater understanding, help, or service.” They wanted to show they were the favored, they had status.

James 2:1-4 says, “My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim to have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people over others? For example, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes. If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, “You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor” —well, doesn’t this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?”

The issue isn’t the clothes. The issue isn’t prominence. The issue is favoritism. The issue is giving favor to one over another. Jesus died for all. Romans 3 says, “all have sinned”. It wasn’t one sin that was worse that Jesus went to the cross for. All our sin...from a little white lie to murder...Jesus went to the cross to pay for. Jesus deserves the seat of prominence. Jesus alone deserves favor.

This fourth symptom is very tied to the third: “places of honor at feasts”. There was an expectation of being placed at the head or given the best seats at the banquets, closest to the host of the party...kind of

like at a wedding. The groomsmen and the brides maids sit at or next to the head table where the groom and bride sit.

The 'best seats in the synagogue' spoke of a religious setting. The 'places of honor at feasts' spoke of a social setting. Jesus not only condemns them for their arrogance in the religious setting, but even points towards the great need and value of humility outside the church in the social setting.

During these social gatherings, they sat in seats of prominence. This fed their ego. This primed the pump of greatness in their minds even more. These seats were often at the front. When they would walk in with their flowing, long robes they would walk all the way to the front and were noticed by all. It was just expected they were going to be given these seats of honor, because they were great. It was a total lack of humility, but of expectation that they were going to be treated different.

In Luke 14, Jesus is at a banquet and notices that those invited went straight to seats of honor without being placed there by the host, so He gave them this advice: "When you are invited to a wedding feast, don't sit in the seat of honor. What if someone who is more distinguished than you has also been invited? The host will come and say, 'Give this person your seat.' Then you will be embarrassed, and you will have to take whatever seat is left at the foot of the table! "Instead, take the lowest place at the foot of the table. Then when your host sees you, he will come and say, 'Friend, we have a better place for you!' Then you will be honored in front of all the other guests. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

This fits with other things Jesus said such as, "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

In the Kingdom of God especially, let God move you to a place of importance. Let your character in God be what people see and recognize. Let your humility lead the way.

In the last few chapters of Mark, we have seen the tension of humility and pride. We have heard the call to be servants and not looking to be served.

The fifth symptom of spiritual pride is “shamelessly cheating widows.” What is the symptom? Spiritual pride leads to a heart that says, “I deserve, I am entitled.” Fairness is not seen through the eyes of God, but the one seeking fairness. Compassion and empathy are no longer a driving force, but gain and compensation. This is bigger than a fair wage. Scripture even tells us that ‘those who work deserve their pay.’

Often times, the Scribes were the managers of a widow’s finances. They dealt with legal and spiritual matters. They were teachers of the law, but they were not to charge. The Old Testament made provision for protection to the widow, orphan, or the poor. Some of these Scribes would use their position of trust and leadership to solicit funds and oppress the more fragile of society.

We have false teachers today doing a similar thing, using their position to wealth. Some of them have even said if you send me money now, I will send you this prayer cloth, signed by me or dipped in holy water—one even said wiped with the my sweat—and whenever you pray and hold this prayer cloth God will answer your prayers. What arrogance and presumption. Many people looking for hope, hurting and needing healing, and trusting the position of spiritual leader sent money.

In Isaiah 10, God said, Isaiah 10:1-4 "What sorrow awaits the unjust judges and those who issue unfair laws. They deprive the poor of justice and deny the rights of the needy among my people. They prey on widows and take advantage of orphans. What will you do when I punish you, when I send disaster upon you from a distant land? To whom will you turn for help? Where will your treasures be safe? You will stumble along as prisoners or lie among the dead. But even then the Lord’s anger will not be satisfied. His fist is still poised to strike."

The last symptom in our passage is “long pious prayers”. The issue was not length of the prayer. The issue was pretending to be righteous because of long prayers. It was about looking like someone that is holy. The issue was self-glorifying. The issue is manipulating into thinking they are something they are not.

I have heard this before, “I don’t know how to pray” or “I am not good at praying”. I say this with compassion, but also as an exhortation,

stop comparing yourself. Prayer is not about the person next to you. One of the outcomes of prayer is casting away the pride within us. Prayer can be as simple as, “God, I don’t know what to say, but here I am.” “God, I need your help.” Prayer is simply communicating with God in the understanding that you are coming to Him.

In Matthew 6, Jesus said, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.”

Jesus isn’t saying you have to be in room behind a closed door. He is saying that our prayer is not about the person next to us. Prayer is not to be used to manipulate others into thinking you are righteous. Often times when the hypocrites would pray they would use religious sounding words and repeat what they said multiple times. This served two purposes: 1) To manipulate God into doing what they want because they are being so righteous, and 2) to get people to see just how righteous they were. That is why Jesus said they have received their reward in full. Their reward was temporary exaltation from people. Prayer is a humble act of coming to God, wherever you are at.

Jesus’s response to this spiritual pride found in these scribes: “They will receive the greater condemnation.” Those who have been given truth have a responsibility with the truth. To whom much is given, much is required. Beware!

I believe there is wisdom in testing the spirits. I believe there is wisdom in checking everything someone says against the word of God. James 3:1 says, “Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly.” That verse is two sided. It speaks to the teacher, and the receiver of the teaching.

The teacher has a weight, a responsibility to be true to God’s Word. There is a responsibility of the teacher being a student that sits humbly underneath the One who leads to truth, that is the Spirit of God, and also being put in a place of accountability by other mature believers. Their words should be tested. Their lives should resemble Christ. There should be growth and maturity. 1 Timothy 3 gives very strong boundaries for one

who is in a position of leadership. Hopefully, they will be pouring their heart and soul into faithfully portraying the truth. But, also remember, they are human and the human heart, even in the most seemingly 'Christian' person still fights against pride...and pride is powerful.

The responsibility of the one receiving the teaching is found in Acts 17:11, which says, "And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth." They searched to see if Paul and Silas were teaching truth.

The mark of a spiritual hypocrite is someone who has much and does little with it. It is someone who thinks more highly of themselves than they ought to. It is someone that has Biblical knowledge, but there isn't much change. The reality is that we are all spiritual hypocrites. The more immature we are in our faith, the more of a hypocrite we will be. Hypocrisy is about our gain, and not about the gift. Maturity in Christ will bring about the shedding of hypocrisy. May we grow in Christ, may we submit to His authority, may we draw near to Him, may we bring our confession to Him and ask Him to continue to work within us, and may we respond to the Spirit of God when He convicts and leads us.

May we fight against spiritual pride that leads to hypocrisy. May we fight against the want to be recognized as spiritual instead of being Christ-like. May we fight for less of us and more of Jesus to be seen in our life. May we turn from entitlement and deserving, but towards servanthood and humility. May we have tender, compassionate, caring, selfless hearts for others.