



Beware of Spiritual Pride

Mark 12:38-40

1. Long Robes (verse 38a)
2. Respectful Greetings (verse 38b)
3. Chief Seats (verse 39a)
4. Places of Honor (verse 39b)
5. Devouring Widows (verse 40a)
6. Long Prayers (verse 40b)

I gave blood this week at the Rock River Valley Blood Center. As the process went on, I engaged the gal who was taking my blood in conversation. My guess is that she was somewhere around 30 years old (or younger). I could tell that she had been through some pretty rough things in life. She didn't attend church. I'm not sure how much religious education she had received.

And so, I began telling her the story of the prodigal son. There was a son, who requested that he receive his portion of the inheritance. And the father gave it him. He subsequently left home and spent all of his father's money on sinful living. This woman had never heard this story before. And when I told her this, her eyes lit up in surprise at the turn of events in the story. And then, I described how the son figured that it would be better to be a servant in his father's house than a slave abroad. And so, he came back home to his father, repentant of his sin. His father gladly took him in and had a party to rejoice in his homecoming.

I told this woman that such are the people that God loves to bring home and forgive. He loves the sinner who seeks the Savior. He loves those who have come to the end of themselves and call upon Him. After a bit of this sort of talk, she opened up a bit more and told me how she has recently been struggling with cancer. A young mother of young children isn't expected to have cancer.

She has a neighbor who has been telling her about Jesus. Her neighbor has been giving her literature and has invited her to church. I don't think that she has come yet. From what I gather, she would like to, but her husband is a bit more resistant. I encouraged her to seek the Lord. I encouraged her to attend church with her neighbor. I invited her to come to Rock Valley Bible Church.

But, as you know the story of the prodigal son has two sons. The one left home and lived sinfully. The other stayed at home and lived pridefully. This one represented the scribes and Pharisees, who think that they have earned everything with their righteous living. But, they haven't. Instead, they are truly the lost ones -- the ones who think that they have it all together. In fact, the bible says that "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

Our text today is in Mark, chapter 12. It comes at the end of the chapter: verses 38-40. In our text, we will see those who are filled with spiritual pride. Today, three verses will suffice for our time together.

Mark 12:38-40

In His teaching He was saying: "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."

My message this morning is entitled, "Beware of Spiritual Pride." Jonathan Edwards once wrote, ...

The first and worst cause of error that prevails in our day is spiritual pride. This is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of Christ. It is the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit to darken the mind and mislead the judgment, and the main handle by which Satan takes hold of Christians to hinder a work of God. Until this disease is cured, medicines are applied in vain to heal all other diseases. [\[1\]](#)

In our text this morning, we see six symptoms of spiritual pride in the scribes of Jesus' day. They liked their long robes. They liked their respectful greetings. They liked the chief seats. They liked the place of honor. They devoured widows' houses. They offered long prayers.

All of these characteristics are evidences of their pride. All of these characteristics are evidences of their corruption. They have taken their position of leadership and have used it for their own aggrandizement. They have exalted their own importance. They have abused their power. They have put on a religious show for all to see. And Jesus condemns them for these things.

In fact, if you look at the end of verse 40, you see that the condemnation that Jesus places upon them is very strong. He says, "These will receive greater condemnation" (verse 40). Greater than those of Israel who refused to believe. Greater than those of Israel who walked in their rebellion.

On several occasions, Jesus spoke of a greater condemnation. Greater condemnation comes upon those who receive greater light, and refuse to believe. When Jesus did great miracles in Chorazin and Bethsaida, the people didn't repent. Jesus said, "It will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you" (Matthew 11:22).

When Jesus did great miracles in Capernaum, the people of that city didn't repent. Jesus said, "It will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you" (Matt. 11:24). Jesus said these things because these Tyre and Sidon and Sodom weren't visited by Jesus, and these cities didn't see His great miracles. These cities didn't hear His great teaching. These cities died in their sins. But, their condemnation will be a lesser condemnation, because the truth that they rejected was less than the truth that Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum witnessed.

So it is with these scribes, mentioned in verses 38-40. These scribes were the keepers of the law. They knew the Scriptures. They taught the Scriptures. And they missed the truth of the Scriptures; they missed the heart of the Scriptures.

And with greater knowledge comes greater condemnation. That's why James says, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). This is the same idea of what Jesus said in verse 40.

Instead of being shepherds to the sheep, they were slaves to their own pleasures. Instead of feeding the sheep, they were "feeding themselves!" (Ezek. 34:2). Instead of strengthening the sickly, and healing the diseased, and binding up the broken, and bringing back the scattered, and seeking the lost, they dominated them with force and severity (Ezek. 34:4).

And Jesus was harsh in His criticism of these scribes and Pharisees. What we have here in Mark's account is far less than we have in Matthew's account. Here in Mark we have a summary. But, Matthew devotes nearly an entire chapter to Jesus' words against the scribes and Pharisees. Seven times in Matthew 23, Jesus says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, ...". "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, ...". "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, ...". Jesus brought strong and hard condemnation upon these religious leaders. Mark's treatment of the same account is a bit less severe.

Nevertheless, Jesus says that we should be on the lookout for such false religious leaders. He says, "beware" of them. Just like you would "beware" of a dangerous dog, so should you "beware" of these sorts of religious leaders. Just like you would "beware" of the high voltage wire, so should you "beware" of these sorts of religious leaders. Just like you would "beware" of the edge of the cliff, ... so should you "beware" of these sorts of religious leaders.

While Jesus had rebuked the scribes and Pharisees on a number of occasions, this is the first time in the gospel of Mark that His warning of them has been so direct. Jesus had questioned their reasoning ability (Mark 2:8). Jesus had "grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:5). Jesus had called them "hypocrites," who preferred the tradition of men above the commandment of God (Mark 7:6-8). Jesus had lumped them in with their forefathers, as those who had killed the prophets (Mark 12:12). But here, for the first time in Mark, Jesus tells the crowds to be on the look-out against these religious leaders. Avoid them. Don't learn their ways.

I want to run through the six symptoms of spiritual pride. And then, I want to think about our own practices at Rock Valley Bible Church. And as you think about application in your own life this morning, please realize that just because you don't walk around in long robes and say long prayers, that doesn't mean that you are free from spiritual pride yourself. It just might manifest itself in another way.

You could be like the man who named his bed, "The Word." This was so that every time someone asked him how he was doing, he could reply with, "I'm great! I've been spending a lot of time in The Word recently!" Or, you could be like the older son, who stayed at home, was filled with pride in his righteous deeds.

First of all, we see that they liked to walk around in ...

1. Long Robes (verse 38a)

They liked these long robes, because they brought attention to themselves. These long robes told all around that they were holy people. This was their design. Those who wore them were spiritual people.

Now, like many things in this list, wearing robes was not wrong during the days of Jesus. All of the men wore robes in those days. To have linen sheets wrapped around oneself was the custom of the day. Furthermore, all in Israel were commanded to wear blue tassels "on the corners of their garments" (Num. 15:38). They were to be worn as a reminder of "all the commandments of the LORD", that they might "remember to do all [of God's] commandments and be holy to [their] God" (Numbers 15:39-40). As a good Jewish boy, Jesus certainly would have worn these tassels. This may well have been the portion of the cloak of Jesus that the woman with the hemorrhaging problem touched. She touched "the fringe of His cloak" (Matt. 9:20).

And yet, these scribes took the commandment of God and used it for their own purposes. They "lengthened the tassels of their garments" (Matt. 23:5). They lengthened their robes (Mark 12:38). In so doing, they pointed out how devout they were to following the commands of God! And they loved their garments. They loved walking around in these long robes. They loved the recognition that came with their apparel.

Let's look at the second characteristic of these scribes. Not only did they like "to walk around in long robes" (verse 38a). But, they liked ...

2. Respectful Greetings (verse 38b)

As they walked around public, they liked to be called, "Rabbi" (Matthew 23:7). They liked to be called, "Father" (Matthew 23:9). They liked to be called, "Leader" (Matthew 23:10). Their robes and their greetings all came as a package. As they were in the market places, they would stand out because of the way that they were dressed. And, as people greeted them, they would use these titles to address them. And every time that they heard such a title, their egos were lifted a bit higher than before.

Let's move on to the third characteristic of these leaders. They liked the ...

3. Chief Seats (verse 39a)

Prominent in every synagogue was an ark -- a large box -- where the scrolls were kept. It was right up front for all to see. Right near the ark were seats, in front of everyone. These were the "chief seats" where the scribes loved to sit. They sat in such a way that all who came to worship would be able to see them. Sitting in these seats would grab the attention of all who came to worship, further lifting up the pride of the scribes.

Pride is the issue in the fourth characteristic. They liked the ...

4. Places of Honor (verse 39b)

Fundamentally, this is like delighting in the chief seats in the synagogues. Only, rather than a religious setting, we find ourselves in a social setting. These places of honor were "at banquets" (verse 39b).

As those who were important in their society, they were often invited to banquets and celebrations -- weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, anniversaries, holiday celebrations. These scribes loved to enter into a social setting and walk forward to the place of prominence for all to notice them.

On one occasion, Jesus was invited to attend a party. He "noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table" (Luke 14:7). So, He said to them, ...

Luke 14:8-11

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Rather than allowing others to exalt them, these scribes sought to exalt themselves.

Finally, they were

5. Devouring Widows (verse 40a)

Literally, they "consumed" the houses of widows. They ate them out of house and home. The law repeatedly put forth protection for the helpless.

The law included protection for the widow and the orphan and the foreigner. And what did these religious leaders do? They took advantage of the poor and needy. They oppressed the widow, and sucked out all of her resources.

But, not only were these scribes full of pride, they also were full of corruption. The great illustration of this comes in verses 41-44, when the widow gave all that she had to live on.

Mark 12:41-44

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

We will look more at this text next week.

Lastly, they offered, ...

6. Long Prayers (verse 40b)

The scribes were notorious for the length of their prayers. But, it's not the length of their prayer was so much the issue here. It was the reason for the lengthy prayers. Jesus said that they made these prayers, "for appearance's sake." In other words, they prayed for a long time so that everyone would hear their prayers and notice their piety and consider them to be deeply religious people.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had warned about this sort of thing. He said, "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men" (Matt. 6:5). In reality, these men were praying to men, rather than praying to God. Indeed, the words coming out of their mouths were being directed heavenward. However, in reality, their prayers were directed toward those who heard, that others might think well of them.

Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full" (Matt. 6:5). Instead of such external prayers, Jesus told his hearers to, "... go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you" (Matt. 6:6). Such were the errors of the scribes.

1. They liked to walk around in long robes (verse 381).
2. They liked the respectful greetings in the market places (verse 38b).
3. They liked the chief seats in the synagogues (verse 39a).
4. They liked the places of honor at banquets (verse 39b).
5. They devoured widows' houses (verse 40a).
6. They offered long prayers for appearance sake (verse 40b).

I'm so glad that none of these things happen in the Church of Jesus Christ today! Aren't you glad that none of these things take place in churches today? Are you kidding me? Every single one of these practices takes place in churches today. Every single one of them!

Our family was in Bloomington this past weekend for Drew and Alyssa's wedding. We sat next to some folks who also lived in Rockford. We began talking with them about things. Soon, the topic came up about church.

They said that they were Roman Catholic. And so, I said, "You know, I have a friend who is Catholic. I was just talking with him last week. He said that in the Catholic church when the priest lifts up the host, he says, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.' He said that he had heard this many times before, but had always missed the gospel. The priest is talking about Jesus, the one who takes away the sin of the world. We need His mercy. My friend said that reflecting upon this reality changed his life and he trusted in Christ alone to forgive him."

Things then drifted into our church. I told them how at Rock Valley Bible Church, I teach through the Bible, verse by verse, taking a few verses each Sunday, and picking it up the next Sunday. And I told them of the power that God gives to people, as they learn a portion of Scripture each week. They soon learn to follow the Lord, rather than following a man's interpretation of the Bible.

And then, I went into telling them about my text for today and all six of these symptoms of spiritual pride. Now, I didn't make connections for them to the Roman Catholic church. Though, I think that things were quite obvious.

As the night progressed, we found out some other things about them. I found out that the father and the son like to play pool. By the end of the evening, I told them that we would have them over to our house to play some pool. They seemed really eager to come.

And so, Yvonne and I have placed them on our "Seven for Heaven" list, that Tom recommended that we have. Local people who need the Lord. Pray for us, that they would come to know Christ. But, it's not just the Roman Catholic church that follows in the ways that Jesus condemns. There are plenty in the Protestant church that practice these things.

1. They like to walk around in long robes (verse 38a).

In many churches across our land, pastors "walk around in long robes." I affectionately call them "dresses." This was the practice of the church in which I grew up. It's one of the things that turned me off as a young boy from the pastorate. I didn't want to wear a robe on Sunday.

Now, I know that many pastors of good churches do this. They claim that they do it to minimize their own dress and direct people to the Word of God, as the robe helps them to hide.

I just know the tendency of the human heart. People easily look at those wearing robes as "holy men." This is dangerous for those doing the looking, and it is dangerous for those doing the wearing. In part, it is for this reason that I don't wear a robe on Sunday mornings. I am no different than you. I am a sinner saved by the grace of Christ, just like you are. May the way that I dress express that reality.

2. They like the respectful greetings in the market places (verse 38b).

Spiritual leaders today still like the respectful greetings. Oh, some of the titles may be different. Those of the clergy are called, "Doctor so-and-so." Or, "Elder so-and-so." Or, "Reverend so-and-so." Even in some places, "The Very Reverend so-and-so."

Again, this practice can be dangerous for the one saying such a greeting -- to lift up an individual higher than they should be lifted up. And, this practice can be dangerous for the one hearing such a greeting -- to think of oneself more highly than one ought to think.

As I told you a few weeks ago, I'm content if you merely call me, "Steve." You don't have to call me, "Pastor Steve." You can if you want. And, in some respect, it is helpful to recognize my role among you as a shepherd of your souls. But, know that it carries with it some danger, especially to those who love being called by their titles.

I just say this: beware of the one who insists that you call them by their titles.

3. They like the chief seats in the synagogues (verse 39a).

There are many churches across our land that have seats up front where the pastors sit during the worship services. I affectionately refer to them as "thrones."

I remember having a part of a church service when I was told to sit in a "throne" during the service. I didn't like it. I felt very uncomfortable. Not regularly sitting in front felt very awkward to me. While I'm here as a pastor of this church, I will do all in my power to resist this practice.

I know of many good churches that do this. But, such practices are filled with danger. They foster pride in a man's psyche, which is not good. You don't want prideful spiritual leaders.

4. They like the places of honor at banquets (verse 39b).

This is a hard one to measure in the church today. I'm not sure of any particulars. Let's just say, you don't have to reserve a special seat for me at our monthly potlucks.

As you know, we were in Bloomington for this wedding. During the banquet afterwards, we sat at a table in the far back corner of the room. As I thought of our table and my text this morning, I thought to myself, "How appropriate for us to be here."

Furthermore, the seats were not the most desirable in the room. They were very cold. It felt as if there was a cold fan directly above our table. If you visited another table, things were fine. It was only our table that was so cold. One of the people sitting at our table called it, "The North Pole." How appropriate for us to be sitting there.

5. They devoured widows' houses (verse 40a).

Churches do this today. I have a friend of mine who pastors a church in a poor suburb of Indiana. He told me that a single mother with several children began attending his church a few years ago. She was destitute and in need of help from the church. She used to attend a charismatic mega-church, only a few miles from his own church building. This church had several thousand attendees each Sunday. This poor woman was attending this charismatic church during one of their building programs. Somehow, the church coerced her into taking out a second mortgage on her home and signing a note with the bank for \$20,000. This was done so that she might "purchase a brick" for the new building project. From the church's perspective, this gave the church \$20,000 cold cash. From her perspective, this gave her a monthly payment of \$100 for the next 30 years.

My pastor friend of mine told me that she had no business signing such a note. She was a needy single-mother. Although she no longer attends the church, she is still indebted to the bank for this money. The church, which is supposed to be a help to the community, has actually become an institution oppressing the very people they need to help! Oh, may the Lord protect us from such terrible things.

6. They offered long prayers for appearance sake (verse 40b).

There is plenty in the church of Christ today that is all show! You may be guilty of this. Perhaps at church, all seems well, when truly things are a wreck at home. I do not desire this for you. I desire for us to be real. Feel free to cry at church if things are difficult! I just want to tell you that my heart is to be real with all of you. I don't want to be up here praying for appearance sake. I don't want to be up here trying to impress you. I want to be real.

I received a letter in the mail. It was from one of our young people. For school, he had to write a paragraph about something. He decided to write it about his pastor. I was very touched by it. It captures my heart exactly for what I'm trying to do with the youth of this church. He wrote, ...

Pastor Brandon ...

Mr. Brandon, the pastor for Rock Valley Bible Church, is a man I love to be around. He is short, stocky, and likes to play basketball. This man will go bald from noogies, and is good-natured.

One of the qualities I appreciate about Mr. Brandon is that he is very fun to be around and play a group game with. He figures out how to tweak a game to make it more enjoyable. Secondly, Mr. Brandon is an interesting pastor. He integrates funny parts into the Sunday sermon so people pay more attention. Lastly, he is kind and generous. He knows how to comfort a hurting person. Mr. Brandon is a fascinating person to be with.

That's the sort of pastor that I want to be.

I love the story that William Barclay tells of the ...

... monk in the old days, a very holy man, who was sent to take up office as abbot in a monastery. He looked so humble a person that, when he arrived, he was sent to work in the kitchen as a scullion, because no one recognized him. Without a word of protest and with no attempt to take his position, he went and washed the dishes and did the most menial tasks. It was only when the bishop arrived a considerable time later that the mistake was discovered and the humble monk took up his true position. [\[2\]](#)

That's the sort of pastor that I want to be.

I have to be honest with you. Pride got the best of me this week. I made a phone call to someone this week. He didn't answer the phone, so I left a message. The return message simply said this, "Steve, I want to tell you that your phone message to me was teeming with pride." After reflecting on what I had said and praying about it, I came to the conclusion that he was right. And so, I called back, seeking forgiveness.

I know that I'm not immune to the dangers of pride in the pastorate. I can only tell you that I'm seeking to avoid all of the dangers of verses 38-40. So don't force me to wear a robe. Call me what you like. Let's not place chairs in front of the auditorium. You don't need to treat me as anything special.

If you want to honor your spiritual leaders, there is a better way. Let me give you a few suggestions.

1. Press on in your spiritual life. Nothing gives me greater joy than to see you all grow in your love for Jesus and walk in His ways. And as you do this, I will feel honored as a pastor to think that I played some small role in the process. I will let you honor me in that way.
2. Pursue the unity of the body. Paul told those in Ephesus to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called." (Eph. 4:1). He continued, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-3). As you do this, I will feel honored to see how the gospel is working in you through this church.
3. Share Christ with those who need a Savior. One of the things that I want to remind you about is Tom's idea of having a "Seven for Heaven" list. Seven people on a list who intersect your life who are without a savior. Seven people who you are committed to pray for and seek opportunities to share the gospel with. You will honor me by taking this suggestion to heart and writing out such a list and praying through it at home.
4. Serve the church. Find ways in which you can help around here. Jump in and lighten the load for everyone. Find others in the church whom you can help. Perhaps this even begins with some sort of social engagement with others you don't know so well, so you can find ways to help and serve them. As you do this, you will honor me.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on November 4, 2012 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Need reference?

[2] Barclay, The Gospel of Mark, p. 301