



## Introduction:

What is real religion? We know this is a valid question because James talks about real religion in **James 1:27**. There is real religion and there is pseudo-religion. There is real religion and there is religion that only looks good on the surface. Can we dot all the I's and cross all the T's and yet still fall short of real religion? Can we work our way through the checklist of rituals and formalities and yet still not attain real religion? Many people today decry religion. They say they want to be spiritual without being religious. The problem is not with religion; it is with many who fall short of real religion. In **Mark 12:38-44**, we see a contrast. We see men who ought to have had the corner on real religion. They knew the Law. They could expound on the Word. But they fell short in their religion. However, then we see an unlikely example of real religion. We see a poor widow, shuffling to the temple collection box. Surely she can't be an example of real religion. And yet, in the contrast between the scribes and the widow we discern what God's real religion is all about and how too often we might go through the motions but not truly submit to God's will.

## Discussion:

### I. Real religion is about God, not me.

- A. When the scribes walked around in long robes, they were saying, "Look at me." When they expected greetings in the marketplace, they were saying, "Talk to me." When they searched out the chief seats at a banquet, they were saying, "Honor me." When they were offering long prayers, they were saying, "Listen to me." Do you see the trend here? Me, me, me, me, me. The scribes were me-centered. Their religion was all about themselves. Their apparent spirituality was all about themselves.
- B. The widow, on the other hand, was God-centered. Instead of thinking about herself, she was thinking about the Lord's house. Notice the extent of her giving. The text says that even out of her poverty, she gave all she had to live on. She was taking what little she had for rent and dinner, if you will, and giving it to the work of the Lord. Who was she thinking about? Who was she centered on?
- C. We need to be like this widow. Not that we need to give over every penny we earn to the church. Rather, that we need to be God-centered. Jesus said the greatest command of all is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind (**Mark 12:30**). We are to seek first His kingdom and righteousness (**Matthew 6:33**). We must be God-centered in every aspect of our lives, not just what we do here when we come together.

### II. Real religion is about giving, not taking.

- A. Because the scribes were so me-centered, they were also selfish. They were so selfish they even devoured widows' houses. They were takers. Who knows but maybe the very widow in our story had only two copper coins to live on because she had been oppressed by a scribe. I'm not sure we fully appreciate how bad this sin was to the Jews. Sure, we think it is bad to mistreat helpless, little old ladies. But according to the Old Covenant that was one of the worst, dirtiest, rottenest sins people could commit. According to **Exodus 22:22**, the Jews were not allowed to mistreat widows. In **Deuteronomy 27:19**, God pronounced a curse on anyone who was unjust to widows. In **Isaiah 10:1-3**, God lists how awful the people are and why He is going to punish them. Included on the list is despoiling widows. In **Jeremiah 7:6**, God said oppressing the widows was one of the reasons Israel was being judged. Further, it was linked with shedding innocent blood and going after other gods. In **Job 22:9**, when Eliphaz wanted to express how bad Job must have been to cause all his suffering, he figured Job must have sent away widows empty. And when Job was talking about his own situation in **Job 31:16, 22**, he said God should let his shoulder blade fall from his socket and let his arm be broken from its socket if he had mistreated widows. Devouring widows' houses was the pinnacle of sin for these Jews. It was the epitome of selfishness and evil. This selfishness was made manifest by their greed. That was the scribes.
- B. The widow, on the other hand, because she was God-centered, was selfless. Instead of taking for herself, she was giving of herself. She sacrificed of herself. She gave all she had to live on into the temple treasury. We may not recognize how impressive that is. According to **Deuteronomy 14:28-29**, the widows were supposed to be supported by the tithes the people offered. I don't believe this temple treasury is the same as the tithe. But what I am impressed with is here was a woman that all the people around her had been commanded to take care of her. However, instead of taking from others and declaring that it was the work of the Lord, she gave to the work of the Lord. Think of the contrast. The scribes would devour widows' houses in order to line their own pockets, while this widow emptied her pockets to build the Lord's house.

- C. We must be givers, not takers. We must be selfless, not selfish. As **Philippians 2:3-4** demonstrates, we must view others as more important. We must view their problems as more pressing. Their needs as more necessary. This is true in reference to any of our resources, whether we are talking about time, ability, or money. However, we especially see this taught regarding our money. According to **I Timothy 6:17-19**, those who have money and material goods are supposed to share, not take more from others. Further, **Hebrews 13:16** says we must share what we have with others. That sharing is the kind of sacrifice with which God is pleased. Instead of selfishness manifested in greed, we need to have selflessness manifested in generous sacrifice.

III. Real religion is about the heart, not the appearance.

- A. The scribes were focused on the outside. They were focused on how they looked to others. They were not focused on what was really happening to them on the inside. They wore long robes because it made them appear more spiritual. They said long prayers because it made them sound more spiritual. They wanted greetings and chief seats because that demonstrated they had a good reputation and they looked good to others. On the inside, they were clearly rotten and evil. As we have already pointed out, they were filled with selfishness and greed. We all know how Jesus viewed the scribes based on **Matthew 23:25-28**. They were like cups washed on the outside but not the inside. They were like tombs and sepulchers that were washed white on the outside, but the inside was full of dead men's bones.
- B. The widow on the other hand was not for show. Think about this—who would ever drop only one cent in the treasury box as a means to attract attention to themselves about how wonderfully spiritual they were? I can imagine that she was quite embarrassed. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if she tried to hide and cover up what she was doing. But she had the right heart and that was what caused her to offer the right sacrifice.
- C. We need to focus on the inside. According to **Matthew 15:7-9**, God doesn't want lip service. He wants heart devotion. Further, if we want to be cleansed, we have to guard our hearts for from it flow the springs of life according to **Proverbs 4:23**. Back in **Matthew 15:10-20**, Jesus demonstrated that what is in the heart is what comes out in the actions and that is what defiles us. We need to work on our heart. If there is anything in our heart that is bad, we need to get that out in the open instead of letting it fester there. We need to worry less about our reputations and more about our righteousness. We need to worry less about our homeliness and more about our holiness. We need to worry less about our how we appear and more about what we are. Get the heart cleansed and the rest will follow.

**Conclusion:**

Real religion is not dressing up for church. Real religion is not using the right phrases in prayer. Real religion is not marking off the checklist. Real religion is not being approved by the right people. Real religion is getting on the cross with Jesus, allowing Him to cleanse our heart, and surrendering our will to His. Real religion is not simply about what is done in the assembly. Real religion is about a life devoted completely to God because we are more concerned about Him than ourselves.