Identity, Image, Investment
Mark 12:35-44

We're looking at Mark's gospel and the events surrounding the last week of Jesus' life. And the passage right before the one we're looking at ends with a scribe, a religious leader, asking Jesus a question: 'which is the most important commandment?' And Jesus replies, to love God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself. And then Mark adds, v34, '*After that* no one dared ask him any more questions.'

Up until now, the religious elite have asked him question after question: Who can forgive sins but God alone? Why do your disciples break the Sabbath? By what authority do you do what you do? Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not? What about the resurrection? What's the greatest commandment? But now, it's as if Jesus has silenced them. Like a debate where one politician thinks he is going to wipe the floor with his opponent, the opposite happens, and the ground shifts. And they're not the authority anymore.

Instead, Mark tells us, Jesus asks them a question.

Identity: Getting it Right
Look at v35: 'As Jesus taught in the temple…' So as we've seen before, the action's centered on the religious epicentre of Judaism, the place where heaven and earth met, where God dwelt among men, *and* the seat of these leaders' authority.

And it's there that Jesus asks the question, v35,: "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?"

Getting someone's identity right matters, doesn't it? I don't know if you saw him, but the man responsible for organising the Queen's funeral was the Duke of Norfolk. And his hereditary seat is Arundel Castle, which sits beside the River Arun. And at the mouth of the River Arun is a yacht club, where I spent a lot of my childhood, because my parents and grandparents were members. And one day, the wife of the previous Duke of Norfolk, Lavinia Duchess of Norfolk, came to visit the Yacht Club. And everyone was stood around chatting politely, drinking white wine and eating cheese on sticks. And I was about 6 or so, and after a while I got bored and decided to try and find my grandmother, who was also there. And I saw her across the room, toddled over and wrapped my arms around her legs in a big hug. Only to look up and see the face of Lavinia, Duchess of Norfolk, and not my grandmother, looking down.

Getting someone's identity right matters. Especially if you're going to squeeze their leg.

And Jesus' question concerns the identity of the Messiah: who do the religious leaders think he is? And, in particular, why the son of David?

Why ask that? I mean, if you read the Old Testament the fact that the Messiah - the ultimate king - will arise from David's line and come and put everything right, is one of *the* great promises of the Bible. It's the promise God made to David himself. It's the promise picked up by all three great prophets. Through Isaiah God says, "to us a child is born, to us a son is given… Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom" (Is 9:6-7). Through Jeremiah God says, "Behold the days are coming… when I will raise up for David

a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king" (Jer 23:5). And through Ezekiel, "And I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them" (Ezek 34:23).

So, given the promises, it's no wonder someone like Blind Bartimaeus, hearing how Jesus is healing hurts and making wrongs right, hears that Jesus is walking past and starts crying out, '*Son of David* have mercy on me!'

Because who is the Messiah? - he's the son of David!

So why does Jesus question that?

Because… is that all we can say about him?

And in v36 Jesus says, "David himself, *in the Holy Spirit*, declared…" In other words, Jesus is saying, 'the psalm I'm about to quote to you isn't just David's words, it doesn't just carry David's weight, but God's.'

So, what does God say? Well, the psalm he quotes is Psalm 110 - the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament. 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.' And the psalm speaks of a king, a man on David's throne, who's also a priest - a priest in the line of Melchizedek. A man who combines the two offices previously always held separate, priest and king.

And when David wrote, '*The Lord* said to my Lord', that first 'Lord' is God. It's the Hebrew word YHWH - God's covenant name: *I am who I am*. But the second Lord is the word *Adonai*, and it's referring to the king on David's throne, but who's not just sat on David's throne, but at the right hand of God, *the* place of greatest honour. And the rest of the psalm speaks of how the king's people will offer themselves to him gladly, and how he'll conquer all his enemies.

And one theory is that David wrote it to be sung at Solomon, his son's, coronation. But whatever reason he wrote it, Solomon failed to live up to it. And every subsequent son of David, every subsequent king, also failed to live up to it.

What didn't fail was the hope that an ultimate Son of David *would* come, and *would* live up to it and *would* reign in righteousness and triumph.

And Jesus is asking, 'but when that king comes, will he *only* be the son of David?' Verse 37, "David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" You see, if David wrote this, which he did, then he's saying the Messiah is *his* Lord: the Lord said to *my* Lord. But how, in a patriarchal culture that deferred to its elders and ancestors, could a *descendant* of the head of the family, a *descendent* of *the* king - David - to whom every other king was compared, possibly be his Lord?

Only if he wasn't *just* his descendant. Only if Messiah didn't just come after David but before him. Only if he didn't just succeed him, but surpass him. Only if David's glory and David's authority had only ever been a shadow of the glory and authority the Messiah had had for eternity past. Only if he didn't just sit on David's throne but on the throne over every throne.

Only if he's not just king of Israel but king over every king. King over every kingdom. King over the whole earth. As Augustine put it, only if he is 'Son of David according to his humanity, [but] Lord of David according to his divinity.' That he wasn't just son *of David*, but Son of God.

But think… as Jesus says all this, where's he standing? In the temple - the place where heaven and earth met. And he's saying is, I'm that Messiah and I'm that meeting place. I'm the son of David and the Lord of David. I'm the One in whom Heaven and Earth meet. I'm the dwelling place of God among men.

But of course, if Jesus is *David's* Lord, that has implications, doesn't it? For these religious leaders and for you and men.

Look how Paul writes to the church at Rome. He talks of 'the gospel of God, which [God] promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ *our Lord*.' (Rom 1:1-4).

You see if Jesus is David's Lord, then he's also your Lord. Which means the question of *Jesus'* identity has implications for *your* identity.

Image: Getting it Wrong

And teaching in the temple, Jesus sees two very different people or groups of people and he watches their behaviour. First are the scribes, the religious leaders; second is a widow.

Verses 38-40, 'And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretence make long prayers.'

So, these men, Jesus says, dress to impress. Because what they choose to wear signals both their religious office and their wealth. It broadcast, 'status'. And they liked the attention that status got them: greetings in the marketplaces, the respect of others. And they liked the honour it gave them: sat up front at the synagogue, in the best seats, set apart from everyone else, facing everyone else. With everyone else looking at them. And at feasts, sat beside the host, served the best food and served it first. The public acknowledgement - you're someone.

So, while the Bible tells us that man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart, these men are entirely focused on that outward appearance, Jesus is saying. On their image.

But of course, being taken up by image can have a profoundly corrupting effect on the heart, can't it. The Old Testament repeatedly tells us, God is the defender of the widow, the orphan, the foreigner - the most vulnerable in society. But instead of defending widows, these leaders devoured them - or at least, what was theirs. Because, if you think about it, when image is what matters most to you, something has to fund that lifestyle, doesn't it? And to pay for it, either you'll take what you shouldn't or you won't give what you should.

And on top of it all, Jesus says 'for a pretence [they] make long prayers.' They cover their greed with spiritual whitewash.

Now, remember, right before this Jesus has been saying that what really matters is to love God with your whole heart and your neighbour as yourselves. But these leaders were loving themselves with their whole heart and the attention of their neighbour. As we saw at the young adult retreat, it's the deadly sin, the capital vice, of vainglory. Of getting your sense of worth, your identity, from the image you project and the applause that comes with it.

But that temptation didn't stop with the scribes. In the apostle John's third letter he mentions a man called Diotrephes, 'Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first' (3 John 9).

And when Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he warns them against being taken in by leaders who display exactly the same characteristics as these scribes, 'For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!' (2 Cor 11:20-21).

And you can probably think of pastors or politicians who do this, who fleece the flock rather than feed it.

And yet… do you recognise the temptation in your own heart? To find your identity, your worth in what others think of you? And as a result you have to project a certain image. That might mean putting on a mask, and projecting your best self, or it might mean hiding your real self so others think better of you?

And think how that can have a corrupting effect. Sure, we may not be given to devouring widows houses, but like the scribes we may still do things we shouldn't and not do things we should, all in order to get the attention, the glory, we think we need. We might criticise or put others down behind their backs. We might twist the truth ever so slightly, all so that others think better of us. When we experience success, we might fail to give credit to those without whom we couldn't have achieved any, like our colleagues or team mates, and we do it - or don't do it - because we want all the credit to come our way. Or, if our identity is tied up with the image of what we have, that's where our resources will go, instead of where God would have us put it.

And in the process it can have the same corrosive impact on our characters and relationships as it was having on these scribes.

In the Greatest Showman, Barnum sings, 'From now on, these eyes will not be blinded by the lights' - because they have been. Because he *has* sought his identity, his worth in his image, in the applause of others. 'I drank champagne with kings and queens, The politicians praised my name. But those are someone else's dreams, The pitfalls of the man I became. For years and years, I chased their cheers, The crazy speed of always needing more…'

But when it all came crashing down he realised, he needed to 'come back home'. Home to an identity not built on the superficial applause of fame, or the fleeting attention of others, or the restlessness of always having to prove yourself and project an image. But home to relationships that were real.

Because, as Jesus makes clear with these scribes, the only reward you get for a life built on external appearance *is* the applause of the crowd. A life that robs others of the good you could have done ends up robbing you: v40, "They will receive the greater condemnation."

Ok, but Jesus sees someone else as well. Mark tells us, v41, that Jesus, 'sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box.' And he watches the rich put in their money, and then comes, v42, 'A poor widow.'

And in the eyes of everyone else she is the exact opposite of the scribes. When it comes to status, they're at the top. But she's at the bottom. They wanted to be significant, she is totally insignificant. They were men, she's a woman. They were rich, she's poor. They devoured widows' houses and she's… a widow.

And all she had to her name was two small copper coins.

Why only that? Maybe the scribes have taken the rest.

And Mark tells us how much those copper coins were worth: v42, they 'make a penny'. Not a British penny, which after the recent UK financial meltdown is currently worthless, but a kodrantes, 1/64th of a denarius. And a denarius was how much a labourer could earn in a day. So these two copper coins are worth about 8 minutes of a man's work. And that, Jesus says in v44, is "everything she had, all she had to live on." And she puts it in the offering.

So here are the leaders devouring widows' possessions, and here is a widow giving all her possessions.

Now, in virtually any world, the rich putting in their large donations would be the one to get attention, wouldn't they? Certainly in a world where image is everything, and wealth helps create that image - the world of the scribes.

But what about the world of our own hearts? Imagine if two people pitched up here one Sunday morning: and one is a well-known and well-loved celebrity, with all the trappings of wealth and fame, but he's also known for his generosity and charitable giving to churches; while the other is a poor woman, who has nothing and who none of us know.

Who would get our attention? Who would I, as pastor, or those in the building committee go and talk to about our building project? In virtually any world, he'd get our careful attention and she would slip in and out unseen.

Except in Jesus' world. Verse 43-44, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty."

You see, her identity was not tied to money, or image. If it was, she couldn't have given it away. What was defining her was her love for God and her trust in him. It's why John Chrysostum wrote, 'Jesus did not look at the value of her money, but the wealth of her soul.' Because what Jesus looks at is not the external appearance of image; it's not what 1st century scribes, or 21st century us might have looked at: the size of her *house*. It's the size of her *heart* Jesus is looking at.

And unlike the scribes, she *is* what it means to love God with your whole heart and your neighbour as yourself. Because she loved sacrificially.

So, how can we be more like her and less like them? How can the hold that image and external stuff have on our hearts, or the way we value others, decrease, and a heart of sacrificial generosity like hers increase?

Investment: Giving your heart

Well, go back to the beginning, and the fact that Jesus isn't just David's son, but David's Lord - the king sat at God's right hand, in the seat of highest honour, the place of greatest glory. And ask yourself, how does my desire for the best seat compare to where he's sat - exalted to the highest place? You see, it's as we grow in awe of his glory that true glory begins to come into focus, and our desire for the shallow glory of image begins to die.

And yet, within a few days, these same leaders will be condemning Jesus as worthy of death. And Pilate, the Roman governor, will offer the crowd a choice: Jesus or Barabbas? Jesus, or a convicted bandit, whose name means, son of abba, son of the father. And the crowd choose him, and so Jesus, son of David and Son of God, Son of *the* Father, takes the place of Barabbas, son of the father.

But in doing so he takes all our places. And this poor woman gives everything she has, and so does Jesus, and he gives it all for you. In the words of Charles Wesley's hymn, 'He left his Father's throne above, so free, so infinite his grace, and emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race.' And he comes down to where you are, to lift you up to where he is. He lets go of glory to lift you up to glory, that you too might become a son or daughter of God, and be adopted into his family. That that might be your identity. Not a fragile identity built on image, but a rock-solid secure one, built on the knowledge that you are loved and chosen by God himself. As the apostle John writes, 'See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are' (1 John 3:1). And Paul would add, 'And if children, then heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ' (Rom 8:17).

And when you know that's your identity, you won't need to rob others, by putting them down or trashing their reputation, to make you look better. Instead, as you see his glory and how he laid it aside to save you, when there was nothing attractive about you, it'll open your heart in love for him and for others.

And instead of using your resources to build up your image, you'll use them to build up others. Instead of using your energy to make yourself look good, you'll use your gifts, however small, to do others good.

And you'll discover, that's not just the way to a secure identity, it's the way to deep and lasting joy.