

Mark 12:40

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Which devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater damnation.

Analysis

Jesus exposes the most grievous scribal sin: **Which devour widows' houses** (οἱ κατεσθίουντες τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν)—the verb κατεσθίω (katesthiō = 'to consume,' 'to devour') conveys predatory exploitation. Widows, lacking husbands for financial protection, were society's most vulnerable. God's law repeatedly commanded care for widows (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17); prophets condemned those who oppressed them (Isaiah 1:23; 10:2; Jeremiah 7:6). Yet scribes used religious influence to extract money from the vulnerable—perhaps through excessive fees for legal services, manipulation of estates, or requiring support for long prayers.

For a pretence make long prayers (προφάσει μακρὰ προσευχόμενοι)—πρόφασις (prophasis = 'pretext,' 'pretense') indicates hypocrisy. Their lengthy public prayers created an appearance of piety while masking greed. Jesus contrasts this with the widow's genuine devotion (vv. 41-44). **These shall receive greater damnation** (οὗτοι λήμψονται περισσότερον κρίμα)—the comparative περισσότερον ('greater,' 'more severe') indicates that judgment corresponds to responsibility. Religious leaders who exploit the vulnerable face stricter accountability (James 3:1). This sobering warning concludes Jesus' temple teaching before He praises the widow's sacrificial giving.

Historical Context

Widows in ancient Israel depended on family support, gleaning rights, and community charity. Without social security systems, vulnerable widows could easily fall into poverty. Mosaic law protected widows' inheritance rights, forbade taking their cloaks as pledges (Deuteronomy 24:17), and designated portions of tithes for their support (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). Prophets condemned leaders who 'devoured' widows through legal manipulation (Ezekiel 22:25) and economic oppression (Malachi 3:5). First-century scribes, as legal experts, managed estates and gave counsel—positions ripe for abuse. Some likely charged exorbitant fees or manipulated vulnerable women through religious pressure. Jesus' condemnation echoes Ezekiel 34's judgment on shepherds who fed themselves while neglecting the flock. Early Christianity prioritized widow care (Acts 6:1; 1 Timothy 5:3-16; James 1:27).

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How might religious leaders today 'devour widows' houses' through financial exploitation disguised as ministry?
2. What does Jesus' warning about 'greater damnation' teach about increased accountability for those in spiritual leadership?
3. How can churches protect vulnerable members from spiritual abuse and financial manipulation by those in positions of trust?

Interlinear Text

οἱ κατεσθίοντες τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν καὶ προφάσει
G3588 devour G3588 houses G3588 widows and for a pretence
G2719 G3614 G5503 G2532 G4392

μακρὰ προσευχόμενοι· οὗτοι λήψονται περισσότερον
long make these shall receive G4053
G3117 G4336 G3778 G2983

κρίμα
damnation
G2917

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 23:33 (Parallel theme): Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

Matthew 23:13 (Parallel theme): But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.

Luke 20:47 (Prayer): Which devour widows' houses, and for a shew make long prayers: the same shall receive greater damnation.