

Who are we listening to? Who are we living for?

Mark 12:38-44

My wife Jemimah and I have been married for a few years now. But on our first wedding anniversary, I learnt a very important lesson.

Being the romantic that I am, I decided just to ask Jemimah what she wanted to do to celebrate. And she gave me a very simple and reasonable request. She wanted to go out to a restaurant, it didn't matter where, and to enjoy a nice dinner together.

And I heard what Jemimah said. But then I started googling. And on google, I saw lots of things that others had done for their wedding anniversaries. Places to visit. Things to see. Grand romantic gestures.

And one of the things I found was a new art exhibition in the city. It looked something like this. Maybe some of you caught it while it was on. But people had said it was good. So, I booked us some tickets. And planned out the day.

And I think Jemimah enjoyed the exhibition. But as we left, she asked me: "So, where are we going to go for dinner?" And I realised that I'd actually forgotten to book a place for us to eat. I was too caught up with the whole exhibition thing. And so, you can imagine the look of disappointment on her face when I suggested that we go to a food court nearby.

I had one person I needed to listen to. I had one person I needed to please. But I got lost, listening to voices that didn't really matter.

Well, just before our passage tonight, Jesus has summarised the whole of the Old Testament law in just two commandments. You're to "*love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength*". And you're to "*love your neighbor as yourself*". There is, Jesus says, only one person we need to listen to. Only one person we need to please. And it's God. That's what the whole of the Old Testament law is pointing us to.

And now, just a few verses later, Jesus introduces us to two different groups. The first is the Scribes, some of the religious leaders of the day. And the second is a single poor widow. And the question that Jesus invites us to ask, in our passage, is: "Which of these groups are listening to God?" "Which of these groups are trying to please God?" And: "Which of these two groups aren't?"

And as we look at Jesus's words tonight, the question that you and I need to ask ourselves is: "Which group do I belong to?" "Am I someone who's listening to God?" "Am I someone who's trying to please God?" Or "Am I someone listening to voices that really don't matter?"

We're going to look at these two groups together tonight. The first of the groups that Jesus introduces is the Scribes. And we see them in verses 38 to 40.

Throughout Mark 12, we've seen Jesus teaching at the Temple in Jerusalem. He's with the crowds. It's the week of his crucifixion. And he's been going toe to toe with these different religious leaders. There were the Pharisees and Herodians, asking Jesus about taxes. There were the Sadducees, trying to catch Jesus out with their question on the resurrection. And now Jesus turns to a third group of religious leaders, the Scribes.

The Scribes, in Jesus's day, were the Bible Teachers. Most of the Scribes would've worked during the day so that they could teach the Bible by night. And some of these Scribes even hand-wrote copies of the Old Testament as their day job. And when they did, they would count the number of letters, and count the number of spaces, in every single line to make sure it was right. These Scribes were the Bible teachers. And they loved the Bible. And so, these Scribes are the kinds of people we would expect to be carefully listening to God and trying hard to please him.

And that makes Jesus's words about the Scribes, in verse 38, surprising. He says to this crowd: "Beware of the Scribes!" Be careful of the Scribes! Watch out for the Scribes!

Now, why would Jesus say that? These guys spent their life studying and teaching the Bible. Why would we need to watch out for them? Well Jesus tells us to watch out for them because these Scribes aren't listening to God. And they're not really trying to please him either. And Jesus points that out, in verses 38 to 40. He points us to three things in their lives that make this failure to listen to God abundantly clear.

First, Jesus says that these Scribes are proud people. Proud people who love to show that they're different from everybody else. Jesus says in verse 38:

“38 Beware of the scribes, who want to go around in long robes and who want greetings in the marketplaces...”

These “long robes” would've been white, full-length prayer robes, with tassels on each corner. That's a picture of one that you can buy on Ali-Express. But they would've looked something like that. And compared to what ordinary people wore, these robes would have made the Scribes stand out as special, different, important.

And the greetings in the marketplaces would have made the Scribes stand out even more. You see, these greetings weren't just a "hello" when you bump into someone at Coles. There were actually rules in the Talmud, the traditional Jewish writings, that meant if you met someone, like a Scribe, you were required to formally greet them. And so, if a Scribe went walking through the marketplace, people would've been standing up, and then bowing down, and giving them honorific titles like "Father", "Teacher", or "Rabbi".

And the problem, Jesus says, is that the Scribes love this kind of attention. They love to seem different from everybody else. The CSB uses the phrase "want to" twice in verse 38. But the idea is stronger than that. These Scribes long for this kind of attention. They take pleasure in this kind of attention. They love it. As teachers of the Bible, they love to be seen as different from everybody else. But Jesus says, that's a problem.

Second, Jesus says that these Scribes are ambitious people. Ambitious people who love to use their position for their own glory and honour. Maybe you've been to a wedding reception before? If you have, there's always that moment, after the drinks and nibbles, when you have to find that big board that tells you where you're sitting. Something that looks a bit like this.

And it's always a bit of a risky moment. You know, "Am I sitting with my friends? The people that I know? Or have I been put up the back with all the weird uncles and aunties?" Where am I going to be? Well Jesus says in verse 39, that these Scribes don't even bother to check where they're sitting. He says:

"38 Beware of the scribes, who want ... 39 the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honor at banquets".

When these Scribes walk into the synagogue, they go and sit right up the front. Where they can see everybody. And where everybody can see them. And when the Scribes went to a banquet or a feast, they go straight up to that front table, and sit down nice and close to the Bride and the Groom. And again, Jesus says that they love this. They love the privileges and position that comes with being a teacher of the Bible. And Jesus says, that's a problem.

Third, Jesus says that these Scribes are greedy people. Greedy people who use their position to prey on others for gain. He says, in verse 40:

“38 “Beware of the scribes ... 40 they devour widows’ houses and say long prayers just for show”.

Now these Scribes weren't allowed to be paid for their Bible teaching. That was part of the Jewish custom. But that didn't stop some of them from seeking out “supporters”. People who wouldn't pay them money. But who might give them unofficial support, like a place to stay or a meal to eat. And clearly some of these Scribes were turning to vulnerable widows in order to find this kind of help.

And the ugly picture that Jesus gives us, in verse 40, is of the Scribes taking advantage of these widows, and then offering long and pious prayers to God to make the whole thing seem legit. These Scribes teach the Bible. But then prey on others for gain. And again, Jesus says, that's a problem.

The Scribes are proud people, ambitious people, and greedy people. And what that shows, says Jesus, is that although they know the Bible, they're not listening to God or pleasing God at all. In fact, Jesus shows us here that these experts in the law are doing the opposite of all that the law commands.

Think about it. God says that we're to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But these Scribes, clearly, just love themselves. They're even willing to bend and twist their service of God to make it all about them. And God says that we're to love our neighbour as ourselves. But these Scribes are exploiting their neighbours. They're even taking advantage of their most vulnerable neighbours for their own selfish gain. The Scribes know the Bible. They teach the Bible. But their lives show us that they're not listening to God at all.

And Jesus says that this kind of hypocrisy - which uses religion to mask and cover self-centred sin - "*will receive harsher judgment*". God sees it. And God will punish it.

And, friends, Jesus's warning here is still for us today. We need to 'Watch out!' for the Scribes. For these kinds of people. And that's because this kind of self-centered and self-serving hypocrisy is still present in God's church today.

There are people who will teach the Bible, not out of love for God, but in order to make it all about themselves. There are people who teach the Bible, not out of love for their neighbour, but for what they can get from others. Whether it's praise, or money, or both. There are people who will teach the Bible, but are proud, ambitious, and greedy. And so, in the things that you listen to, the people who you follow, or the books you read, you need to watch out. To watch out for people like these Scribes.

And Jesus's warning here is not just for those who teach the Bible. It's for all of us who serve in God's church. And that's because all of us, if we're not careful, can share in these attitudes when it comes to serving God and others. Whatever your role - whether you're a Bible Study

Leader or serving tea and coffee - you can do it in a way that bends and twists your service of God and others to make it all about yourself.

And so, ask: Do I love it when people notice me serving? Do I love it when people think of me as godly, or gifted, or servant hearted, because of the things I do? Do I feel good about myself when people come and thank me for my service? Do I serve for what I get out of it? Or do I serve because I'm listening to God, and wanting to please him?

And friends, this is really important. Because, if we don't hear what Jesus is saying here, then we will make God's church all about ourselves. And not about Jesus. And to do that would be a tragedy. When you serve God and others, you can make yourself great, like the Scribes, or you can make Jesus great, but you can't do both. And so, watch out. Watch out for people like these Scribes. And watch out for these things in your service of God and others.

That's the Scribes. But Jesus introduces us to the second group in verses 41 to 44. And this 'group' is a single poor widow. A single poor widow who shows, through her actions, that she is listening to God and trying to please him.

Having finished teaching the crowds, Jesus turns now to do some people watching. And he's not sitting at his favourite cafe, or in his local park. He's in the Temple treasury. And what Jesus was watching was people coming to the Temple in order to make their offerings. And we know, from history, a little bit of what this scene would've looked like.

In the Court of the Women, where Jesus would've been sitting, there were thirteen or so "trumpet chests". And as the name suggests, these were wooden chests, with a metal trumpet

at the top, where you could place your gifts and offerings. And as Jesus watches the crowds, in verse 41, he sees a lot of rich people putting large sums of money into these 'trumpet chests'.

And it would've been obvious to anyone there how much money each person was putting in. There was no bank transfer, or cash, or cheques. People would've been carrying around sacks of coins. And when they poured their coins into these metal trumpets, it would've made a lot of noise. So, in this Temple Court, Jesus would've been able to see and hear how much people were giving.

And as Jesus watches all these rich people pour in large sums of money, he sees one poor widow put in two tiny coins. The smallest coins in circulation - like two 5 cent pieces today. And you can imagine, it would've made hardly any noise at all as she dropped them into the chest. But Jesus decides that what he's just seen is so important, that he needs to call his disciples together in order to teach them a lesson. And the lesson is this: "Watch the widow". Watch the widow, Jesus says, because she's put more into the treasury than all of the others.

Now, I'll be honest, math and numbers have never been my strong suit. But even I know that, on one level, what Jesus says here makes no sense. Ten cents is less than a dollar. And one dollar is less than five dollars. That's kind of how money works! I mean, if your church treasurer started saying stuff like Jesus here, you'd probably vote them out! So what does Jesus mean?

Well what this widow shows us, Jesus says, is something important about God's economy. An economy which is different from our economy. And she teaches us two things about how God views our lives and our money.

The first is the obvious implication of what Jesus says here. In God's economy, giving is measured by sacrifice and not by amount. And that's what Jesus says in verse 44. He says that the widow had given more because:

"44 they [the rich people] gave out of their surplus, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had"

In God's economy, giving is measured by sacrifice and not by amount. But that's really not the way that we think about our money, is it? Imagine, tonight, that someone made a \$1 million donation to church. And imagine that someone else made a \$50 donation. I think all of us would be much more impressed by the \$1 million. I mean, imagine what the church could do with \$1 million! But what Jesus is saying here is that if that \$1 million was given out of surplus, and that \$50 was given out of need, then the \$50 actually counts for more than the \$1 million. That's what Jesus is saying here. That's how God's economy works.

And we see why that's the case in the second thing the widow's example teaches us. She shows us that God cares more about the giver than the gift. You see, God sees the heart. He's not fooled by the outward actions. He looks through the gift to the heart of the person giving it. And what God delights in is not an extravagant gift, but a generous giver.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul writes about a generous gift that the Macedonian church has given him. They gave, like the widow, out of *"extreme poverty"* and *"beyond their means"*. But what Paul is thankful for is, not the dollar amount of the money itself, but the *"wealth of generosity on their part"*. And that's what God sees. The heart behind the gift.

In God's economy, the giver matters more than the gift. And it's because a generous heart shows that someone's grasped the gospel of grace. Paul says that *"9 Jesus Christ, though he*

was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich". The gospel ought to give us generous hearts. Because, in Christ, we have become spiritually rich through God's generosity towards us. And that matters more than the gift itself.

Now, what Jesus says here about our money is both an encouragement, and a challenge, to our giving. It's an encouragement because Jesus's words show us that the significance of your giving is not measured in dollar amounts.

For example, if you work one shift a week at Maccas. And you give \$20 of the \$100 you earn, that's significant in God's eyes. That's very generous. In fact, what Jesus says here is that that might be even more significant to God than the giving of those who have much more money. In God's economy, giving is measured by sacrifice and not by amount.

And so, let me encourage you, if you've been hesitant to give to the work of the gospel because you feel like what you have to offer is too little, then give. Giving is measured by sacrifice and not by amount. God will notice what you give, even if the budget doesn't.

But Jesus's words here are also a challenge, aren't they? And that's because many of us can so easily be like those rich people. Giving large sums of money, but giving only out of our surplus.

I don't know your situation. But if that's you tonight, then I hope you feel the challenge of Jesus's words. God's economy is not like our economy. He looks beyond the numbers and sees our hearts. And God wants us to be generous people in response to his generosity to us. And so the question for you tonight would be: "What would it look like for me to give beyond my surplus?" You know, beyond what's left when I have everything that I want.

Maybe that looks like cancelling a subscription or two, and increasing your giving to church? Maybe it looks like eating out one less time a month, and supporting an AFES worker in our congregation? They're just ideas. But what would it look like for you to give sacrificially and not just out of surplus? Jesus says we need to "watch this widow" because of what she teaches us about how God sees us and our money.

But, finally, I think Jesus tells us to watch this widow, because she teaches us about something even more important than money. And we see that in the final words of our passage. The CSB says that this widow put in "**44**...*everything she had - all she had to live on*". But a more literal translation might be, she put in "**44**...*everything she had - her whole life*".

What this widow shows us, beyond the money, what it looks like to listen to God. What it looks like to please God. She shows us how to relate to God in a way that the Scribes weren't.

You see, this unimpressive widow, with her two little coins, gives everything she has to God. In fact, she gives so much to God that what she does seems foolish in the eyes of the world. Everybody else at the Temple keeps most of their money for themselves. But this widow gives everything she has to God.

But what her actions show is that she's been listening to Jesus. By entrusting her whole life to God, giving him everything she had, she's loving God "*with all [her] heart, with all [her] soul, with all [her] mind, and with all [her] strength*". This widow shows us the response that the whole of the Old Testament law is calling for. She gives her whole life to God.

And, of course, she can do that because of what Jesus himself is about to do. He's about to give his whole life to God. A perfect life. A spotless life. A life that God really is pleased with.

And because Jesus has done that for us, we can offer up our imperfect and unimpressive lives to God, knowing that he'll accept us.

And so, whatever your life is like, however small or frail it is, if you bring it to God in faith like this widow, he will be pleased to accept it.

That's what this widow shows us, above and beyond the money. If you come to God in faith, entrusting yourself to him, he will accept you.

Two groups. Two attitudes. But only one was listening to God. Which group are you?