



*Ensuring pleasing God
is your highest priority*

Main Point

How much of what we do, revolves around the praised by others? Jesus warned about the trap the religious leaders of his day had fallen into: the trap of being more concerned with receiving the praise and adoration of others, than God's affirmation.

Main Scripture:

"It is a dangerous trap to be concerned with what others think of you,
but if you trust the Lord, you are safe."
Proverbs 29:25 (Today's English Version)

Introduction | An afternoon people watching with Jesus

Imagine that you are sitting in a public place, like a shopping centre, waiting for someone to arrive, or finish shopping. Your phone has died, and there is no where else to look – what do you do? You watch the people around you who are going about their lives.

Even though it is a totally random activity, I'm sure everyone of us has engaged in it at one time or another. Some people make a sport of it. Why? Well, because people are inherently interesting! People's behaviour often seems quite peculiar to us, and so we sit and wonder why do they do what they are doing? And why do they say the weird things they say? Or why did they choose to wear what they wear that day, especially, when we personally, would never dream of wearing clothes like that?

There has to be a reason people behave the way they do? And, it can be a lot of fun, trying to work out why they do.

Today, it is as though we are in earshot of Jesus as he comments on what he has learned by watching two different people in two very different situations.

The behaviour of the first group, the religious leaders, unfortunately concerned him – to such a degree that he told everyone to beware of them. However, the second person, a non-descript widow giving her offering, seemed to warm his heart.

What is amazing however, is how inter-connected these two seemingly random situations are.

Jesus was in the midst of some hot debate with the teachers of the law – and they are doing their best trying to trap him in his words (Mark 12:13).

So, Jesus looked around at the crowd and said,

38 "... Beware of these teachers of religious law! For they like to parade around in flowing robes and receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces. 39 And how they love the seats of honour in the synagogues and the head table at banquets. 40 Yet they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property and then pretend to be pious by making long prayers in public. Because of this, they will be more severely punished." (Mark 12:38-40)

Ooh! I bet that caused a stir and some loud murmuring amongst the crowd!

Certainly, Jesus was not one to be politically correct!

And he didn't hesitate to call out heart attitudes that have the potential of derailing our faith journey.

Today, I'd like us to spend some time looking at why the behaviour shown by the religious leaders is so dangerous.

Point 1 | The desire for praise and adoration is a dangerous trap we are all susceptible to fall into

We are told that the religious leaders liked 'parading around in flowing robes' and 'receiving respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplace.'

These actions speak of the desire to draw attention to oneself, and more specifically the desire for people to admire them, due to their status as leaders in society.

Now, even though their leadership position warranted them being allocated a seat of honour at dinner parties – the fact that they 'loved' these 'honoured locations' shows that it is the praise and admiration of people that was of primary importance to them.

And it is their desire for praise and admiration which corrupted them – for they began to treat those of a lower status (ie. widows) dishonestly.

In fact, this is the judgement that God had made against the shepherd leaders of Israel years earlier, "though you were my shepherds, you didn't search for my sheep when they were lost. You took care of yourselves, and left the sheep to starve." (Ezekiel 34:8)

It is not hard, as we picture these scenarios in our mind, for us to see how susceptible we all are to similar behaviour.

While we may not parade around the shopping centre in flowing robes, we may wear clothing that draws attention to a particular social standing we believe we hold. And, while we may not demand a seat of honour at a party, we'll happily accept the invitation to be pumped up into first class or the VIP lounge.

Yes, unfortunately, all of us – to some degree or another – love being praised and admired by other people.

There is a proverb which is particularly relevant.

Proverbs 29:25 says, *"It is a dangerous trap to be concerned with what others think of you, but if you trust the Lord, you are safe."*

Now, before we launch into exploring why we must be alert to this trap, I must clarify that I'm not advocating that we disregard entirely what other people have to say about us.

It is an important that we are open and receptive when someone reveals we have a personal blind spot or weakness.

The person who completely disregards the opinions and input of people, is often selfish, and has an overly inflated opinion of themselves. Often they will struggle to empathise and see things from another person's perspective.

However, when we become overly preoccupied with receiving praise and admiration from people, we can end up becoming addicted to it.

I mean, everyone loves being praised, admired and applauded. But because this feeling is so wonderful, it is easy to begin to change our behaviour **so that** we receive the wonderful words we want to hear.

On the flipside, if we crave people's praise and validation, we can end up being caught in a trap where we feel we need to please everyone – or at a minimum, keep everyone happy.

But, why is it a trap?

Firstly, we learn from Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians, that *"our purpose is to please God and not people. God alone examines the motives of our heart"* (1 Thessalonians 2:4). So, if we are overly concerned with the opinions and praise of people, we can easily miss God's purpose for our life.

Secondly, when people's opinions begin to take precedence over what Jesus says about us, we'll be tossed around by everyone's priorities, rather than God's priorities. Jesus, on the other hand, clearly had his priorities straight. He said, "I always do what pleases [my Father]" (John 8:28)

Point 2 | Reminding ourselves of God's truth is the antidote to resisting cravings for praise and admiration from people.

So, what is the antidote to craving people's applause or praise?

It is learning and reminding ourselves of the truth of how God sees us.

I'd like to share with you some of my personal truths that I like to keep in the forefront of my mind. These are especially helpful when I feel I'm being pulled in different directions by the opinions or expectations of others.

I remind myself that:

1. Even God can't please everybody. Only a fool would try to do what even God can't do. Remember what Jesus said, *"Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets"* (John 6:26)
2. My happiness is not dependent upon people's approval. Again, Jesus told the religious leaders, *"Your approval means nothing to me, because I know you don't have God's love within you."* (John 5:41-42) When we know we are accepted and loved by God, the drive to be loved by people greatly reduces.
3. God has promised never to reject us. In Psalm 27:10 we read *"even if my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will hold me close."* Only our relationship with Jesus Christ will satisfy our craving for approval and acceptance.

The clue to the final antidote lies in the promise we read earlier *"... if you trust in the Lord you are safe"* (Proverbs 29:25b)

Point 3 | The gift of a humble widow teaches us to entrust our lives into the safety of God's loving care.

Let's see this verse in action.

Within minutes of finishing teaching in the temple, Jesus went and sat near where everyone was making their offerings. He noticed that many of the wealthy people were giving large amounts of money – their bag of coins probably made a large noise as it hit the bottom of the collection box.

But then someone caught Jesus' attention, a poor widow came and dropped in two small coins.

Recognising a teachable moment, Jesus told his disciples, *"I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on."* (Mark 12:43-44)

What we see in this scenario is the total opposite of what we witnessed by the religious leaders in the marketplace.

Here the person who is on the very bottom of the social ladder, is noticed by the person who sits at the very top of the ladder.

None of us would question, the great faith shown by this widow. I've never been in a position of being asked to give away everything I have to God.

How could she do it? Was she tempted to hold onto her last two mites, so there was enough for dinner?

In order for this widow to have the faith to give her last mite to God, she had to have known God's promise: "... those who trust the Lord will be safe."

I wonder if she had a Scripture from Chronicles in her mind that day?

"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him. (2 Chronicles 16:9)

This lady was not living according to the opinions of people, nor was she striving to draw attention to herself.

She was also not trusting in her own ability to survive.

Rather, she offered to God her whole livelihood - all she had – depending upon him for everything.

That was the act of worship that warmed the heart of Jesus.

I am confident that widow did not go hungry that evening.

I am confident that her loving heavenly Father kept his promise. For, as we read today, our God "He gives justice to the poor and food to the hungry" (Psalm 146:7).

Let us follow the example of this widow, and courageously entrust our lives into the care of our heavenly Father.

7 Day Devotional

Those who follow the lectionary know that we have been journeying through the book of Ruth, known as "A Redemption Love Story". A 7 day devotional has been made available for you to reflect on this story this week.

