

Mark 12:38-44 – True and false religion

What is the worst of all possible sins? What will bring us God's fiercest anger? The Bible's answer is, "false religion". God hates religious hypocrisy above all other sins. In this passage there are two parts; Jesus condemns the false religion of the "scribes" (Jewish teachers), and praises the true religion of a widow. Which are we more like?

1. Jesus' warning against the scribes (v38-40)

The scribes' religion was man-centred, not God-centred. We can see this in four different ways: 1) It was done for other people to see. They wore long clothes to impress others (v38). 2) It was done for other people to praise. They loved to be greeted and given titles like "teacher" and "father" (Matthew 23:7-10), and they prayed to impress other people (v40). 3) It was done to make gains and 4) It was done at the expense of others. They were trusted by people such as widows, but then they cheated them (v40). In summary, the scribes wanted to please men in this life, not God on the day of judgment. Jesus tells us what to do about such people: "beware"! (v38). We should notice who they are, mark them, and avoid them. When they teach the Bible, obey the teaching – but do not copy their disobedience! (Matthew 23:2-3). Jesus tells us that they will receive a greater punishment at the last day (v40). See also James 3:1, which tells us that teachers will "face a stricter judgment".

Who is your religion trying to please? Man, or God? Do you want people to think you are a good person, or have you humbled yourself before God to admit you are a guilty sinner?

2. Jesus' praise for a widow (v41-44)

Then Jesus watched in the temple, as different people gave money to the offering box. (There was a box for offerings that you could give to at any time – it was not just during services). He noticed many rich people giving plenty of money – money they could easily spare. Then he saw a poor widow give just two small copper coins. We do not know exactly how much money it was, but it may have been $\frac{1}{4}$ of a day's wages. It was very little – but was all the widow had to live on. Jesus saw what had been done, and called his disciples to teach them. Jesus said that the widow had given most of all. Her giving had been self-sacrificial. It had really cost her something. (Note that Jesus did not speak to the widow – perhaps she never knew that the Son of God had seen and praised her during her life).

This should be a great encouragement and a challenge to us. It is an encouragement because God does not count the same way men do. Whether we have little or much to give does not matter. What matters is whether we give from our hearts. Indeed, if we are poor, then our giving really costs us more, and is then more significant in God's eyes. Jesus will accept true worship and true giving, whoever it is from. You can come to him, and receive a wonderful welcome. It is a challenge because this means nobody has any excuse for not serving God with what they have. We cannot say "I can do nothing!" and then be lazy. Everyone can do or give something, even children.

So, which kind of religion is yours? Is it for man, or God? From the heart, or not?