

**“Beware of the Scribes”**

**Mark 12:38-40**

**March 8, 2026**

**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**

*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

This morning we continue our series in the Gospel of Mark. The Jewish leaders of Jerusalem have been challenging Jesus in the Temple. And he’s answered wisely to every one of their questions. Now he is challenging them.

With in mind, let’s turn to our text: Mark 12:38-40.

And as we do, please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

<sup>12:38</sup> And in his teaching he [that is, Jesus] said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces <sup>39</sup> and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, <sup>40</sup> who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

**Prayer of Illumination**

Lord, you are righteous,  
And your rules are righteous.  
You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness  
and in all faithfulness.  
Your promises are well tried,  
and we, your servants, love them.  
Give us now understanding as we come to your word,  
that we might find life in it.  
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus’s sake. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:137-138, 140-144]

**Introduction**

I don’t know how many of you have watched the late 90s sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* ... but I couldn’t help thinking this week of one of their ongoing jokes.

Robert, the main character's brother, is a really big guy, who's pretty insecure ... and every time he walks into a room and people are quiet, and look serious and stern, he gets a look of concern and alarm on his face and he says: "Is this about me?"

And it's a little hard for me to not to think of that question when I come to this text.

Is this about me?

I mean, look at me.

Walking around in long robes: check. You see this thing. It's huge.

The best seats in the synagogue at that time described the seat that was up front, facing the congregation in worship. [France, 490-491]. Check.

Making long prayers – I've done that.

Greetings at the market place: I did have someone stop and greet me as "Pastor Nicoletti" at Winco the other day.

I mean, on an initial, surface-level reading, I appear to be checking a lot of these boxes. So is this really just about me? Do you need to even bother listening to this sermon, or should I just preach it to myself?

Well ... here's what I'd say – I'd say certainly it could be about me. But it could also be about you. Even none of the specifics in Jesus's list about the scribes applies to you, even so, the heart of Jesus's critique could apply to any of us.

It's not that I'm off the hook. I'm not. It's you might be on the hook as well.

Because when we take a closer look at what Jesus is getting at, I think that what we see is that: Jesus warns us here against idolizing the esteem of other people, because it will twist our relationships with people, it will hollow-out our relationship with God, it will not satisfy us, and God intends something much better for us.

Let me say that again: Jesus warns us here against idolizing the esteem of other people, because it will twist our relationships with people, it will hollow-out our relationship with God, it will not satisfy us, and God intends something much better for us.

Let's take that one piece at a time.

### **Jesus Warns Us Against Idolizing the Esteem of Other People**

First, Jesus warns us here against idolizing the esteem of other people.

And this is one of those things that becomes more clear when we look at these verses in the original language. The ESV unfortunately uses two different active verbs in verses 38 and 39, implying that the concern is the scribes liking somethings, and then just having other things. But in the original language, just one active verb is used – *theló*, which could mean just to "like" something

in a fairly bland way – but it can also have a much stronger meaning: “to desire” or “to take pleasure in” something. [France, 490]

In the Greek, Jesus highlights what the scribes desire, and then he lists four things. The scribes desire [France, 490]:

- walking around in long robes
- greetings in the marketplaces
- the best seats in the synagogues
- the places of honor at feasts

The warning in these first two verses are not about what the scribes have or even what they do. It’s about what they desire.

And that’s how the NIV and the American Standard Version translate it – in keeping more with the structure of the original text than the ESV does.

The core thing Jesus warns about in verses 38 and 39 is what the scribes desire.

And what is it they desire?

Well ... at its heart, they have an inordinate desire for the esteem of others.

That’s what’s at the center of each of these four things.

First, in verse 38, they desire to walk around in long robes. These robes were “full-length prayer shawls with tassels attached at the four corners.” These shawls were meant to distinguish “rabbis and scholars as men of wealth and eminence.” [Edwards, 378] Where all Jews were called on to wear tassels to remind them of God’s covenant law [Numbers 15:37-41], the scribes made their tassels much longer, and more noticeable, to emphasize their piety to others. [Matthew 22:5; Leithart, 182] And Jesus notes that they don’t just wear these garments during official ceremonies – but they like to “walk around” in them. And Matthew’s account makes it clear that it’s not really about their clothing identifying their job, so they can better serve people – like a police officer or a nurse wearing a uniform so you can better ask them for help if you need it – instead, for these scribes the clothing in view is aimed at causing people to give them honor and esteem.

Next, they desire greetings in the marketplace. This wasn’t just a polite hello. Commentators explain that what this meant was that “when a scribe walked down the street or passed through the marketplace, everyone [...] was expected to rise before him.” [Edwards, 378; see also Witherington, 334]

Third, in verse 39, they desire the best seats in the synagogues – seats which, they desired not because they assisted them in leading and serving the people, but because, as commentators note, they were markers of rank – of social status [Edwards, 378].

Finally, at the end of verse 39, they desire the places of honor at feasts, showing that they wanted to be given esteem and respect in whatever social setting they happen to be in.

The common thread is that the scribes desire the esteem of others. [Myers, 320]

And in Matthew’s extended account of Jesus’s teaching here, Jesus said just that – he said of these scribes: “They do all their deeds to be noticed by men.” [Matthew 22:5]

And key here is that this desire was inordinate – it was much stronger than it should have been.

Now, on one level, God designed us not just to love others, but to rightly delight in being loved by others.

Before sin ever entered the world, when God had made Adam, even though Adam had a perfect relationship with God, God said that it was not yet good – that Adam needed another human being to love and to be loved by [Genesis 2:18]. Then, when God made Eve, and Adam’s first words to her were words of admiration, and praise [Genesis 2:23], I imagine that Eve delighted in Adam’s esteem of her. And that wasn’t wrong. Eve delighted in Adam’s esteem and approval of her, just as Adam would delight in Eve’s esteem and approval of him. Desiring a approval and esteem from other human beings, in its proper proportion, is not inherently sinful – it’s something we were made for.<sup>1</sup>

And we see this in our own lives. It’s not a sign of health or of God’s intended design if a child doesn’t care what their parents think of them, or a spouse doesn’t care what their husband or wife thinks of them, or an employee doesn’t care what their employer thinks of them, or a student doesn’t care what their teacher thinks of them.

Whatever the setting, it’s not inherently wrong for us to care about the esteem in which others hold us. But it can be a major problem if we care about it more than we should – if we have an inordinate desire for the esteem of others.

It’s like a lot of things. Take wine, for example. It’s not wrong to like wine. But it can wreck your life if you like wine far more than you should. It’s similar with the esteem of other people.

In fact, when we want and desire anything far more than we should, the Bible often refers to that as idolatry. It’s when we take a good thing, and we try to make it an ultimate thing in our lives. We take a created good, meant to be enjoyed, and instead, we worship it like it’s a god.

What’s in view here is an inordinate desire for the esteem from others. Jesus warns us here against idolizing the esteem of other people.

And there’s a lot of ways we can do that.

We can do this in the area of religion, as the scribes here do: engaging in our faith not primarily as a way to know and love God, but as a way to grasp at esteem from others, to be seen by them as good, and admirable, using our religion to serve the idol of human esteem, rather than as a means to serve God.

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment is in part about guarding the reputation of others – the esteem in which their held. And the Westminster Shorter Catechism even says that an aspect of the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment is that we should also preserve *our own* reputation – *our own* good name – which is really about preserving accuracy in what kind of esteem others hold us in.

And the Book of Proverbs 22:1 tells us: “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor” – or “to be esteemed” as the NIV has it – “is better than silver or gold.” Esteem, a good reputation among other people, is not inherently bad, any more than money is inherently bad – though both can be twisted and made into idols, as we will see.

And this temptation isn't limited to the religious realm of life.

We can do it in our social life, making our relationships less about truly knowing other people and being truly known by them – less about loving others and being sincerely loved by them – and we can make our relationships more about getting as many people as we can to think highly of us – to esteem us. Our relationships become less about true connection, and more about us serving our idol of admiration from others.

Or we can do this with our work, or our labors, whether in the workplace, or at home, or in our other pursuits in life. We can make that work that we do less about serving God and other people, less about using and enjoying the gifts God has given us, less about fulfilling God's calling on us, less about providing for ourselves and others – and instead we can make our work primarily about being seen by others as good or talented or successful, in a way that grasps at the esteem and admiration of others, serving our idolatry of their approval and admiration.

We can do this with our online presence as well. Rather than using social media to connect to others, we can use it to try to grasp at “likes” – at having people we only sort of know, or maybe even total strangers, admire us and look up to us, as we post our carefully crafted opinions, or carefully curated images of our homes or our work or our faces or our bodies – all to try to feed the hungry idol of approval and admiration in our hearts.

This tendency can look different for different people. What does it look like for you? Where are you serving this idol of approval and admiration from others in your own life?

The foundational thing we see here is that Jesus warns us against idolizing the esteem of other people.

And there are four reasons we should be warned against this idolatry.

### **It Will Twist Our Relationship with People**

The first is that if we idolize the esteem of others, it will twist our relationships with other people.

Jesus alludes to this in verse 40 when he refers to the scribes “who devour widows' houses.”

What's going on there?

Well, there are a few interpretations of exactly what practice might be in view here: whether it's scribes becoming trustees of widows estates and then embezzling from them [Myers, 320; see also France, 491, Witherington, 334], or scribes trying to seize widows' property for unpaid debts [France, 491], or scribes pressuring widows to give to the ministry of the Temple, in ways that were exploitative [Myers, 320-321; France, 491], or something else.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It could also be an allusion to a scandal in the Roman empire, known to many, in which a man who presented himself as a Jewish scribe had persuaded a high-standing woman named Fulvia to make substantial gifts to the Temple in Jerusalem, only to embezzle the money for himself. [Edwards, 379]

But whatever the details in view may have been, the pattern is clear: The scribes are exploiting the very people they're supposed to be helping. [Horne, 157; Leithart, 182]

Just a few verses earlier in conversation with a scribe, Jesus said that the second great commandment is to “love your neighbor as yourself.” [12:31] But the scribes are using other people for their own personal gain.

And taken in context, I suspect this wasn't just about money – but that it was about the scribe's using these widows to get money, and then using that money to further boost their social status further. Their idolatry of social standing – of the esteem of others, of the admiration of others – was leading them to use other people rather than love and serve them.

And we too can do this – even if it has nothing to do with widows or money.

Idolizing the esteem of others will twist our relationships. Because it causes us to see others less and less as people we are called to love, and more and more as a means to an end.

Other people become merely an audience, which we want to extract esteem and approval and admiration from – we don't care so much about their own wellbeing as we care about the praise they can give us, or the praise they can help us get from other people.

We can do this on a grand scale, but we can also do it on a very personal level.

We can be tempted to treat our children less as people we want to know and love, and more as representatives of us whom we need to succeed, so that others will think well of us. Or especially if you're younger, you can be tempted to treat your sibling – your brother or sister – less as someone to love, and more as someone to compete with for the approval of your parents or others. Friends can be seen less as people you care about, and more as assets who make you more or less popular in the eyes of others. And we could go on.

When we idolize the esteem of others, it will twist our relationships with other people, so that rather than loving them, we tend to use them.

### **It Will Hollow-Out Our Relationship with God**

But it doesn't stop there. Because Jesus shows us here that if we idolize the esteem of other people, it will also hollow-out our relationship with God.

We see this in the second half of verse 40, where Jesus points out that the scribes “for a pretense make long prayers.” The idea is that they make long prayers, not primarily to know God more deeply, but so others will see them making those prayers.

At root, what Jesus is pointing us to is any time we do anything that should be done, first and foremost for God, but we really do it to try to grasp at the approval of other people.

Have you ever had someone do something nice for you – something kind and loving ... but they did it in such a way that you could tell – you knew – that they weren't primarily doing it to care for you ... they were doing it first and foremost so others would see them do it, and then think well

of them? It feels awful when someone does that to you. When someone uses you in that way, even if they technically are doing something kind to you, you feel less loved as a result, not more.

God can experience the same thing. God is a real person. He loves us. And he wants us to love him. And anytime we do something he's asked us to do, and we do it more to be seen by others, than to love God – when we do what God asks us to, not primarily to serve him but to serve our idol of the approval of others – then even though we look like we're loving God, we're actually using him. And he knows it. And it hollows out our relationship with him.

When we idolize the esteem of others, it will twist our relationships with other people, and it will hollow-out our relationship with God. Both results are tragic.

But this idolatry of the scribes is also tragic for another reason as well.

### **It Will Not Satisfy Us**

Because, idolizing anything – including the esteem of other people – will never actually satisfy us. It always leaves us hungry for more.

In Jesus's day, the scribes already had a tremendous amount of authority and esteem from the people around them. [Edwards, 378] But in verse 38 and 39 Jesus tells us that they still desire more – and they're still doing things to grasp at more. Though they enjoy more honor and esteem than almost everyone else around them ... still, it's not enough.

They have esteem from other people. But the esteem they get never really satisfies. The hunger for admiration continues – maybe it even increases. Maybe they even feel worse after they get a taste of it.

Writer Cynthia Heimel explored this idea when it comes to modern celebrities. She writes that she pities celebrities, because after getting what they wanted they often become less happy. The night they become famous they may be thrilled. They are finally adored! But often, the next day, or the next week, or the next month, they are miserable. Because, she writes, “All their fantasies had been realized, yet the reality was still the same. [...] That giant thing they were striving for, that fame thing that was going to make everything okay, that was going to make their lives bearable, that was going to provide them with personal fulfillment and [...] happiness, had happened. And nothing changed. They were still them.” [Heimel; see also Keller summary in *Jesus the King*, 31]

Author David Foster Wallace reflects on this same idea in one of his novels. The scene a young tennis prodigy confessing to a spiritual mentor that he deeply longs to become famous for playing tennis. He wants so badly to have his picture featured in tennis magazines, so others will then look up to him. And he believes that once he has that level of fame – once his pictures are in magazines and people look at him with admiration – then he will be satisfied. Then he will be okay.

“You feel,” the mentor says to him, “[that] these men with their photographs in magazines care deeply about having their photos in magazines. [That they] derive immense meaning [from it].”

“I do.” the student answers. “They must. I would. [Why else] would I burn like this to feel as they feel.”

The mentor thinks for a moment. “Perhaps they did at first.” he says. “The first photograph, the first magazine, the gratified surge, the seeing themselves as others see them [...] perhaps. Perhaps the first time: *enjoyment*. After that, [...] trust me: they do not feel what you burn for. After the first surge, they care only that their photographs seem awkward or unflattering, or untrue. [...] Something changes. After the first photograph has been in a magazine, the famous men do not *enjoy* their photographs in magazines so much as they fear that their photographs will cease to appear in magazines. They are trapped, just as you are.”

The student’s delusion, the mentor explains, is to believe that just as he feels envy at those who are famous, so those who are famous must feel satisfaction at being famous themselves. But that’s not true. They’re not satisfied.

“The burning doesn’t go away?” the student asks.

“What fire dies when you feed it?” the mentor replies. [Wallace, 388-389]

But ... why doesn’t esteem from other people satisfy us?

A few year ago, Andrew Freemant and Monica Aggarwal wrote an article about the phenomena of malnutrition in the obese.

We tend to think of those suffering malnutrition as being underweight – and often they are. But, they explain, there is also a significant frequency of malnutrition among the obese. Because proper nutrition is not just about getting enough calories. It’s about getting the vitamins, the minerals, the protein, and other elements the human body needs to function. And in our world, which offers highly processed foods that can be rich in calories but poor in other nutrients, and in our society where those kind of highly processed foods are often cheaper than more nutritious foods, then, especially among the poor, who cannot afford more nutrient-dense food, there can be people who are overweight but still malnourished, because they’re not actually getting key nutrients their bodies need.

And I think the same thing can often happen with our souls. We are designed to receive and enjoy and even desire the approval and esteem of other people – it’s true. But we’re also designed to seek, and to desire, and to receive, the approval and esteem of God. We’re made for both. And it is not good for us to be without either – though the esteem of God is even more foundational for the health and nourishment our souls.

But in our spiritual poverty, so often we ignore, or turn from, or even reject the esteem of God. And we seek to live off of the esteem of others alone. But we were not designed for that. And though we may gorge ourselves on the approval of others, our souls remain malnourished. Because the approval of others can never deliver the spiritual nutrients that only the love and esteem of God can give to us.

And so, hungry for God’s approval, we keep grasping at and swallowing up the approval of other people. But that never satisfies. Because that’s not what we’re actually most hungry for. No matter how fat we grow on the admiration and esteem of others, our souls remain malnourished, and we burn with hunger.

This is what the scribes experienced. And we too can fall into the same trap, grasping at, and inhaling the esteem of other people, while neglecting the esteem of God, and never satisfying the burning hunger within us.

Jesus warns us here against idolizing the esteem of other people, because it will twist our relationships with people, it hollow-out our relationship with God, and it will not satisfy us.

### **God Intends Something Much Better For Us**

But God doesn't just warn us away from something bad for us here.

Underlying all of this is a reminder that God intends something much better for us.

God offers us the food that can satisfy us. We may enjoy the emotional nourishment that comes from the esteem of other people. But in his love, and his esteem, and his approval, God offers us an even richer feast. And it's such folly that we would neglect or refuse what he offers us.

As one commentator puts it, the "scribes are aiming far too low, seeking the tarnished honor that comes from their fellow teachers rather than the glorious honor that comes from God Himself." [Leithart, 184]

Implied in this passage – lying behind it – is the amazing reality that we: foolish, sinful, often silly human beings, can have the esteem and approval of the Maker of the Universe.

And God doesn't make us earn his approval like a worker earning a paycheck. God doesn't make us earn his esteem like a performer trying to win over the public, or a crowd. God doesn't call us to wear a mask, and put a false version of ourselves forward, in order to win his love.

Instead, God seeks to adopt us like a child. A young child, adopted into a new family, has done nothing to earn the love of their new family – nothing to merit or grasp at the care and esteem their new parents will show them.

And the Bible tells us that in the gospel, God seeks to adopt us as his children. We don't earn that – but he offers us his love and esteem as a gift of sheer grace.

All we are called to do to become his children, is to place our trust in him – to receive Jesus by faith, and to rest on him in the gospel. [Westminster Shorter Catechism #86] And as we do that, God will be our Father, and we will have his, just as a loving Father has for his child.

And once we are his children, it's true that he calls on us to live a certain way. He calls us to love him and love our neighbors. He calls us to serve him and serve those around us. And he delights in us loving him and loving others – in us imitating him by living lives of love and grace.

But even as we seek to do that, we do not earn his approval, but it is a gift. We are not employees perfectly meeting our quotas and then being compensated with his approval. We are children, offering to our Father our imperfect chores, our clumsy drawing we made for him, our sloppy attempts to make him breakfast. Our often inept and flawed efforts, which only a parent could love. And he loves our efforts, and he loves us, and he praises and esteems us, not for our

perfections, but because we are his children, and we are trying – however imperfectly – to love him. [Westminster Confession of Faith 16.6]

This is the esteem, and the approval, and the love God offers to us in the gospel. It is more gracious than the esteem of the world. By God’s grace, it is more attainable than the esteem of the world. And strikingly, it is more powerful, more satisfying, more joyful and wonderful than the esteem of the world.

It is the esteem of God our Maker, and in Jesus, he offers it to us as a loving Father.

It is what our hearts truly long for when we chase after the esteem of others.

Jesus warns us against idolizing the esteem of other people, because it will twist our relationship with people, it hollow-out our relationship with God, it will not satisfy us, and because God intends something much better for us.

And so, brothers and sisters, even as we appreciate the sincere love and esteem of the people around us, let us not idolize it.

But instead, let us look to God, our Maker and our Father, and let us seek his gracious approval – his loving esteem, which alone can satisfy our hungry hearts.

For God has made us for himself. And our hearts are restless until they rest in him. [Augustine, *Confessions* 1,1,1]

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

- Augustine. *Confessions*.  
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 Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 1996. [An important disclaimer: While I have drawn from this work in this sermon, I would not recommend this book for most readers. It contains disturbing content that many would find troubling.]  
 Westminster Confession of Faith. “Of Good Works” 16.6. [https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter\\_16](https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_16)  
 Westminster Shorter Catechism. Question #86. <https://opc.org/sc.html>

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Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.