

The Widow's Offering

Mark 12:41-44

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If you have ever found yourself with some time to kill, whether it's waiting at a mall, an airport, or anywhere else where there are lots of people, sometimes it's fun to engage in some "people-watching". It is fascinating to compare how others of how people handle some of the same situations we face. Sometimes watching other people go about their lives can be instructive. Sometimes we can learn from their positive example, while other times, we learn from their negative examples.

In the passage we are going to unpack this morning, that's what we see Jesus doing. After all that has gone on in the temple over the course of a couple days, now we see Jesus sit back and watch people going about their business in the temple. Never one to miss an opportunity to teach His disciples, Jesus draws some important lessons from watching one woman just going about her business of worship. Jesus' instructions today are incredibly challenging and will force us to take a careful look at our own lives and hearts.

In The Temple

We pick up today right after Jesus had made clear claims to divinity in front of the religious leaders. They were unable to refute Him, even though they hated what He had to say. Jesus had also cautioned the people about the religious leaders, saying they were far more concerned about people's opinion of them than they were about their service to the Lord. It is after this encounter that Mark records for us what happened next.

⁴¹ Jesus sat down near the collection box in the Temple and watched as the crowds dropped in their money. Many rich people put in large amounts. ⁴² Then a poor widow came and dropped in two small coins.

⁴³ Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. ⁴⁴ For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on." (Mark 12:41-44, NLT)

Apparently, after Jesus finished sparring with the religious leaders, He decided to sit down for a while and just watch what was going on with the crowds. It seems likely that the crowd Jesus had amassed may have dispersed at this point, and Jesus was left alone. Mark says Jesus sat down near the collection box in the temple and began to watch the people making their offerings.

To give you a bit of a picture of what the scene would have been like, this section of the temple containing the collection boxes (some translations refer to it as the treasury), was probably in a passageway between parts of the temple courts. There were 13 different collection boxes set up. Several of the boxes were labeled for a specific

purpose, while others were simply set up for freewill offerings. This is like how today people can choose to give money toward the building fund, a special project, or just the general needs of the church.

On top of these collection boxes was a funnel-like piece of metal. You could throw your offerings into the top, and it would funnel the money down into the box below. As a result, sometimes these boxes were referred to as “the trumpets”, because the top kind of looked like the bell of a trumpet.

With this background in mind, we can turn our attention to what Jesus saw as He watched people giving their offerings. Mark tells us that many rich people put in large amounts. In those days, people didn’t write checks, and they certainly couldn’t give online. They also didn’t have paper money. The only money people had was coins. Different coins had different values, based on the metal they were made of (gold, silver, bronze, copper) and the physical size of the coin itself.

Because of this, when people placed money into the collection boxes, it would make noise as the metal coins clanged against the metal funnel. Someone who was putting a lot of money in would end up making a lot of noise. You can imagine the sound it would have made when a wealthy person came up with bags of money to pour in—I imagine it was kind of like the sound you hear when a slot machine pays out a big jackpot!

So you can imagine that when a person put a large offering into the collection boxes, people kind of stopped and took notice of them. Jesus saw this dynamic happening. But unlike most people, who were likely impressed by these sizable offerings, Jesus was focused on someone else—a woman who was likely overlooked by everyone else.

In the midst of all these people making their offerings, there came a poor widow, who dropped in two small coins and walked away.

The woman would have been readily identifiable as a widow because of the clothing she wore. Jesus could probably tell that she was poor based on the condition of her clothes.

This woman wasn’t trying to draw attention to herself. She may have assumed that since she didn’t have much to give, she wasn’t really worth paying attention to. She just wanted to come in, give what little she had to the Lord, and get out. Most people wouldn’t have given her a second glance. She was (in the minds of most people) a nobody. But Jesus, rather than overlooking her, paid close attention to her and used her as an example to His disciples.

In Greek, Mark says that the offering she put in was two lepta. Our modern translations describe the offering in other terms, knowing most people aren’t familiar with ancient coinage. The lepton was the smallest coin in the Jewish coin system. Two lepta were worth approximately 1/64 of a denarius, and a denarius was equivalent to a day’s wage. Mark, writing to a Roman audience, helpfully says this would be similar to the smallest

coin in the Roman system, which was called a quadrans. Our modern translations do the same thing, telling us that two lepta is roughly equivalent to a couple of pennies. This was a seemingly insignificant offering. Two lepta wouldn't be able to pay for much of anything, and yet the woman still gave the two small coins she had. Many of the other people's gifts made a loud sound as they were thrown into the collection boxes, but her gift would have been inaudible to all but the closest person.

This is what makes Jesus' notice of this woman so surprising. Her offering was a tiny fraction of what everyone else was giving, but Jesus highlights her gift above everyone else's. We are not told that Jesus said anything to the woman, but He apparently called the disciples together and said that this woman had put in more than anyone else.

Jesus was fond of saying things that were a bit provocative in order to get the attention of His disciples. He went on to explain why He could make such a seemingly outlandish statement. Jesus said that while the others were giving out of their excess, she was giving everything she had to the work of the Lord. The rich people put in their sizable gifts, and they remained rich. This woman put in what she had, and as a result, she remained just as poor as she was before. It's possible her offering reflected all she had earned as a beggar this day. Jesus highlighted that while everyone else was giving out of their abundance, she was giving in a way that required her to trust in God for provision. She was giving extravagantly, even though her gift amounted to very little in human terms.

What Jesus was highlighting was an important principle: **it is not the amount of our gift that matters to the Lord, it is the heart behind it that matters.** It would have been very easy for this woman to rationalize keeping her two small coins. She may have concluded that since they wouldn't be able to pay for much, it wasn't even worth giving them. She could have easily concluded that the two small coins were far more valuable to her than they would be to the temple leaders. She could have even concluded that maybe she should just have given one of the coins to the Lord and kept the other for herself. But she did none of these things. She gave what she had to the Lord, not because God needed her money, but because this was an act of worship. The Lord doesn't need our money. God's primary concern in our giving is not whether we pay the bills of the church or whether we are fulfilling a pledge or duty. His concern is *why* we give what we do! The Lord desires us to give joyfully back to Him, recognizing that our hope, our provision ultimately comes from His hand.

Biblical Giving

This principle is not really anything new in Jesus' teaching, but it was something people struggled to grasp (which is why I think He chose to use this woman as an object lesson during the last week of His life). During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had told His disciples,

“Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal.

²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.
(Matthew 6:19-21, NLT)

Later, when the rich young ruler came to Jesus, he asked what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the commandments. The man replied that he had done so since he was a boy. Jesus replied by telling him that the one thing he still needed to do was to sell all he owned and follow Him. The man left feeling sad because he had great wealth.

Jesus then said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven.

What was Jesus saying in these statements? Was He saying that money is evil? Many people believe that is what the Bible teaches, but it isn't. Listen to what the Bible actually says about money,

For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows. (1 Timothy 6:10, NLT)

Paul says that the *love of money* is evil, and if we aren't careful, loving money will lead us away from the Lord. So, the common theme here is not about money per se, it is about a divided heart.

Jesus taught about this as well when He said,

²⁴ "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money. (Matthew 6:24, NLT)

Why is it that we struggle to be generous with what we have? Jesus' answer is that we love our stuff more than we love the Lord. Many of us who have much are unwilling to sacrifice *any* of it to the Lord. Jesus highlighted this woman because though she didn't have much, she was willing to give *all* of it to the Lord. Her heart was not divided. We need to take a careful look at our own lives and see where our loyalties might be divided. Remember, that we cannot serve two masters—so we should look carefully for things we may love more than God.

I think it would be a mistake to understand this passage as teaching that Christians should give away everything they have to live on and expect that the Lord will provide. If you look at the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, you'll notice that they were not condemned because they didn't give all the money they had earned from the sale of their land, but for *claiming* they had given all of it! They were trying to use their gifts to make themselves look good. This was their true motivation, not honoring God. Their failure was in the heart of their giving, not in the amount.

This woman wasn't concerned about gaining honor for herself, and it would have been easy for her to conclude that her offering was so small that it didn't matter, but she gave

anyway, because she was seeking to honor the Lord. This is the kind of heart God desires. We can only give in this way when we love the Lord above all.

Lessons

As we look at Jesus' teaching in this passage, there are several lessons we can draw.

First, we should look for things we love too much. A helpful thought experiment is to ask yourself what would you struggle to give up if the Lord asked you to? Would you struggle to give up some of your comforts? Your possessions? Your freedoms? Your car, home, or even family? Would you struggle to give up some of your leisure activities or hobbies? When we find ourselves tensing up at the idea of sacrificing some of these things for the Lord, we are probably identifying idols in our lives. We must learn to see the world through the light of eternity. The things of this world will not last, but the things of God are eternal. It isn't necessarily that these are bad things, but when they become ultimate things, they stand between us and the Lord.

Second, the tithe is not necessarily the gold standard of giving. Sometimes we believe that if we are giving ten percent of our income to the Lord, then we are fulfilling our duties, and God should be pleased. But this is what the others were doing in the temple that day. They were fulfilling their duties, but their hearts were really not in their offerings. Sometimes we pay our tithe with the same enthusiasm as we pay our taxes. That isn't what God desires. The whole point of giving is to teach us to trust God, to hold the things of earth loosely, and to remind us of where our true loyalties lie. That might look different for different people.

Some people may not be giving any of their income to the Lord and need to start. For those people, 10% might be a huge step, one they're not able to make just yet. I believe the Lord is honored by their obedience to begin giving something regularly to the Lord. Over time, they may be able to increase their giving.

For others, giving a tithe may not be much of a sacrifice at all. You may find that even after giving a tithe, you have plenty. In those cases, it might be appropriate to go beyond the tithe in your giving. A tithe is a good principle, but rather than just basing our giving off of a formula, we should be prayerfully asking the Lord how He wants us to give. Remember that one of the primary purposes of giving to the Lord is to teach us not to love money. What that looks like in practice may be different for different people.

Third, giving that honors God has more to do with the heart than the amount. Often, people feel like the church is just trying to get their money. Some of that is a result of televangelists and prosperity preachers who seem to talk about nothing but money. Let's be clear, the Lord doesn't need our money. The reason He asks us to give of our income back to Him is because too often, our hearts are tied up in the things of this world, which keeps us from Him. Giving reminds us that the things of this world are temporary and teaches us to rely on God. The Lord is less concerned with how much we give to Him than He is with *how* we give to Him. Are we simply going through the motions or fulfilling a duty? Are we giving to Him because someone told us that if we do

so we'll get more money in return? Or are we giving with a heart that seeks to worship Him, a heart that views our gifts as a way of aligning our hearts with His? We must focus on giving with the right heart. If we do that, then the amount won't matter.

Fourth, our giving is between us and the Lord. I don't know much about your personal finances, and I don't know where your heart is. As such, I am not qualified to tell you what you should be giving. That isn't my role. As you hopefully know, I don't know what anyone gives to the church, and I like it that way. You need to wrestle with this question for yourself.

On the flip side of this, this is a reminder that if our giving becomes a source of pride or we find ourselves subtly bragging to others about how generous we are, or expecting people to cater to us or treat us differently because of how much we give, then we've missed the point as well. Many of the people who were coming to the temple relished making a show of their gifts. They were not serving the Lord, they were serving themselves. We need to remember that how we handle the money the Lord has entrusted to us is between us and Him. No one else needs to know. His is the only opinion that matters.

Fifth, this story is about more than just money. Though admittedly Jesus is definitely teaching His disciples about the proper way to give to the Lord, I believe we are missing an important element if we only think about this lesson in terms of money. I believe He is teaching us a principle about choosing to lay everything we have before the Lord, trusting that nothing we give to Him is too small, and believing that sacrificing to honor Him will always be worth it.

Think of what you can offer to the Lord. Do you have talents you can use in His service? Do you have time you can dedicate to serving Him? Are there things in your life you know are keeping you from drawing closer to the Lord? Lay those things on the altar of worship. I believe Jesus was trying to show us what genuine love and devotion to Him looks like. It looks like joyfully giving to Him everything we have and trusting Him to provide.

Quite frankly, I don't like talking about money, because I feel like many people already think that's all the church is concerned about, and I don't want to reinforce that idea in their heads. Jesus, however, taught about money relatively frequently because He understood that how we handle our earthly resources is often a window into our hearts. He knew that how we handle our money, our time, and our talents tends to say a lot about where our devotion truly lies. The Lord desires people who are fully devoted to Him. My prayer is that you'll wrestle with the question of what this looks like in your life and strive to live with a heart that is fully devoted to Him, and withholds nothing from Him. That heart is what the Lord desires, no matter how much or what we give.

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