

“THE WIDOW’S MITE”

(Mark 12:41-44)

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1. [Traditional Services Only]: Read Text: Mark 12:41-44 and Pray.

2. [Story of Worship for A Quarter]

A family sat down at the lunch table following church one Sunday afternoon. As usual, they had nothing better to talk about, so guess what was the topic of conversation -- that morning's church service.

“The sermon was boring,” said the teenage son. “Yeah, and the pastor really messed up the reading of the scripture, too,” added his older sister. Mother: “Well, the choir sang really off key BAD!” “I’ve got to admit,” said the father, “it was a pretty uninspiring day.”

Finally, this family's 7-yr. old son was tired of all of it: “Hush, you guys, and quit complaining! After all, what did you expect for a quarter?!”

A–Well, in today’s consumer-oriented society, this is precisely the attitude that most of us have regarding financial giving in the church: ...we *give* in order to *get* something in return, and when we *do* give, we expect to *get* what we pay for!

1–E.G., If we like what’s happening in our church, then we put money in the offering; if not, then we don’t give at all, or we give very little;

2–If we like the pastor(s), we give, and if we don’t, we don’t;

3–If the church provides programs that meet *our* needs, then we give, and if it doesn’t, then we may even withhold money as a way to vote our displeasure.

B–Do any of these sound familiar? Now, most of us wouldn’t admit it if they *were*, but the reality is that it IS how many of us practice the connection between faith and finances.

C–And yet, over and against this consumer-oriented mentality, when we study the Bible carefully, we find it teaching us something radically *different* about the proper attitude that people of faith are to have regarding money and giving.

3. In today’s scripture from Mark 12, for example, we find Jesus denouncing the religious leaders of his day essentially for their “consumerist” mentality – they liked to show how “religious” they were by how much money they gave.

A–[At Contemporary Service Only: Listen to the story.... (Read Mark 12:41-44 from MSG)]

B–You see, in contrast to the hypocrisy of these religious leaders, Jesus praises the sincerity of a poor widow – someone who’s likely been taken advantage of by these very “leaders.”

C–And in comparing and contrasting these two, I believe Jesus here is trying to teach us at least **2 things that people of faith are to understand & practice regarding money & financial giving** – it’s these that I want us to explore on this Financial Stewardship Sunday: ¹

--II--

4. First we learn that true, biblical giving is **SACRIFICIAL** – that is: it’s *costly* to the giver.

A–From the Greek translation we learn that the two copper coins this woman put in the Temple treasury were called “*leptas*” – they were the smallest Jewish coins in circulation, and these two would have been worth about 10¢ in today’s currency = not a lot of money!

B–And yet, Jesus says that “[*She*] has put in more than all the others” put together (Vs. 43). Now, HOW could that be?

C–Well, in Verse 44 he explains by saying that these others were... [NRSV] “*contributing out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty.*” ² [MSG] “[*giving*] what they’ll never miss; [*but*] she gave... what she couldn’t afford...”

1–In other words, while the others were giving out of their excess (eg., what they didn’t need anyway), this woman’s trusted God so much that she chose to give, *not* having enough *to start with!* – she gave *despite* the fact that it might hurt her economically.

2–Halford Luccock once wrote: “*The gift which counts is the gift that costs.*”

5. So let me ask: when *you* give financially to God through the work of your church, does it cost you something? In your giving are you *risking* something for the work of God’s kingdom? Or, are you simply giving out of your excess – that which you don’t really need anyway?

A–A pastor was once talking to a farmer friend about faith giving, and asked him, “*If you had 200 horses, would you give the church 100 so we could use the proceeds for ministry?*” The farmer replied, “*Certainly!*” “*Well, if you had 100 cows, would you give the church fifty?*” The farmer replied, “*Sure, of course!*”

Then the pastor asked, “*If you had 2 pigs, would you give the church one of them?*” The farmer then said, “*Now cut that out, Pastor; you know that I only have 2 pigs!*”

B–You see, where the rubber meets the road is when God asks of us (as he is today) to be willing to risk something in our giving so that the work of God’s kingdom can be accomplished through the ministries of our church?

C–After all, to God it’s not the *amount* of the gift which matters, but the *cost* to the giver – it’s not the *size*, but the *sacrifice* that counts most. So, are your gifts *sacrificial*?

–III–

6. Well, today’s story teaches us that biblical giving is not only *sacrificial*, but also **GENEROUS** – that is: it holds nothing back, but is willing to surrender it all to God.

A–Remember Verse 44, where Jesus says: [NRSV] “*Out of her poverty [i.e., out of what she didn’t have enough of] she has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.*” [MSG] “*She gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford – she gave her all.*” ³

1–Think about this: according to Jewish law, this woman only had to give a *tithe* (10%) of her income to the work of God through the Jerusalem Temple.

2–In other words, she could have given *one* of her two coins, and that would have equaled 50% of her income... *far more* than enough to satisfy the law.

3–But instead, she gave *both* coins (100%), leaving herself *nothing*.

B–Now, for people today enslaved by consumer economics (including, unfortunately, a lot of folks in church), on the surface this appears to be *reckless* financial management.

C–But in biblical, kingdom terms, this “reckless” act actually reveals this woman’s deep *trust* in God to provide for her needs.

7. How sad, then, that our giving patterns as Christians today reveal that most of us don’t seem to possess enough faith or trust in God to even *tithe* the 10%, much less be generous like this woman was with anything *above* the tithe.

A–You see, on the whole, we’re a society of “tippers,” not “tithers” – we don’t mind giving our waiter/waitress a 15-20% tip, but we complain that giving God 10% is too much!

1–We’re like the little girl who was given \$2 by her father and told she could do anything with \$1, but that the other \$1 was to be given to God at church. So, with visions of all that she could buy with the \$1, the girl skipped off towards a candy store to buy something sweet, holding both dollars tightly in her hands.

As she skipped along, she tripped and fell, and the wind blew one of the dollars down a storm drain. Picking herself up, she looked at the dollar still in her hand, then at the drain, and finally said, “*Well, Lord, there goes your dollar!*”

2–You see, like her, we tend to hold back our part *first*, and then give God the left-overs – as today’s scripture puts it, we give “*out of our excess*.”

B–But in today’s story, the widow didn’t hold anything back –she gave her *all* to God generously.

1–What’s the name of our stewardship focus this year? “*Generous Living*” – meaning that part of living a generous life of faith involves learning the value & practice of generous *giving*.

2–And the irony that people with a consumerist mindset don’t understand is that when we’re generous in our giving to God, God always provides enough to meet our needs.

3–A Christian philanthropist was once asked, “*How is it that you give away so much, and yet have so much left over?*” He replied, “*I suppose it's like this: I shovel it out, and God shovels back in... and He has a bigger shovel than I do!*”

-IV-

8. You see, more than anything, this story in Mark 12 teaches us that God honors gifts given from the heart, no matter what their size or value.

A—And so, when we offer our financial gifts to God *sacrificially* and *generously* through the work of His church, we’re expressing our trust in Him to faithfully meet our every need.

B—This widow trusted God in how she *sacrificially* and *generously* handled her money. May the same be said of us today as we seek, like her, to live the “*Generous Life*.”

9. Now, in order to help train and discipline us in this endeavor, each year we’re invited to make financial commitments to God’s work through our church for the next year.

A—Members and guests already received a packet with materials and an estimate of giving card this past week – if you forgot to bring yours with you today, or didn’t receive one, we have extras available today from the ushers. [USHERS PASS CARDS OUT...]

B—Some ask: “Why written estimates of giving?” Three reasons:

- #1—It’s a tool of *discipline* for OURSELVES (to encourage *us* to be faithful in giving by setting a goal to shoot for);
- #2—It’s a tool of *discernment* for our CHURCH (so our church can be a good steward of the financial resources entrusted to it);
- #3—It’s a spiritual *commitment* to GOD (expressing to God our intent to trust and serve Him this next year through how we handle our money).

C—As the music plays, I want to invite each of us to prayerfully consider how you will answer God’s call to financial giving through His church next year by completing this card. When you’re done, please bring it to the altar to commit to God in prayer.

D—[PRAYER OF COMMITMENT...]

10. [CLOSING SONG]

ENDNOTES:

1. We need to acknowledge that the mere mention of money from a church pulpit makes many people squirm in their seats. In fact, I’ve come to discover that there are a lot of people (including a lot of church-folks) who think money is a subject that shouldn’t be discussed from a church pulpit at all – that preachers should stick to “spiritual” issues in their sermons.

And yet, when we read the scriptures carefully, we discover that there is no more deeply *spiritual* subject in the Bible than that of money and possessions. One sixth of the gospels, including one out of every three parables of Jesus, deals with stewardship of money and possessions. In the gospels, Jesus spends more time talking about money than about prayer and worship and Bible study combined! You see, while Jesus wasn’t a fund-raiser, he nevertheless dealt with money matters so much because he understood that in God’s eyes, how WE handle our money MATTERS. He understood that our own attitude and perspective towards money and financial giving reveals a great deal about the nature and depth of our spiritual commitment to Him and to God (Matthew 6:21, “*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*”).

2. In the Greek translation of this passage, the word “abundance” means “*superfluous excess*” or “*wasteful exorbitance,*” ... and the word “poverty” literally refers to “*a falling short;*” a “*deficiency,*” “*lack,*” or “*destitution.*”

3. We don't know how Jesus all these things about this woman (how it was all she had, or poor, or even a widow). But the gospel writer (Mark) isn't concerned about those details. For him, the point is that this woman she didn't hold anything back for God –she was generous in her giving.