

## Jesus Notices A Widow's Giving

This evening we will be studying yet again another familiar passage from God's word. It is the story of Jesus being in the Temple and watching as the people pass by putting money into the treasury. One particular individual catches His eye, a widow. This story is also recorded in the *Gospel of Luke* as well (Luke 20:45-47; Luke 21:1-4). In both Mark and Luke, the story comes at the point in Jesus's life when He is near the end of His public ministry, spending His last days in Jerusalem. Although some people believe this is yet another parable being told by Jesus, I dispute that interpretation. In neither the *Gospel of Mark* or the *Gospel of Luke* is Jesus represented as telling a story. Both Gospels present this as an actual event Jesus sees and comments on. He tells us to beware of the scribes and of our own internal tendency to desire the reputation of being pious and self-righteous. And then He sits down opposite the Temple and sees a poor widow putting two copper coins into the treasury. Here is Mark's account of this event found in Mark 12:41-44 (RSV):

**41. And He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. 43. And He called His disciples to Him, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."**

Just to give you some background information so you can better understand why it is believed that the *Gospel of Mark* was written to a Roman audience, this passage provides some evidence that leads to this conclusion. The King James Version renders verse 42 thusly: **"And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing."** In the original Greek language in which Mark wrote his Gospel, the word for the coin translated *penny* in the RSV and *farthing* in the KJV is **quadrans**. The **quadrans** was the smallest Roman coin in circulation at that time, and Mark is telling his Roman audience that this widow threw in two coins that came up to the total value of the smallest coin the Romans used. This would imply that Mark's audience was more familiar with Roman culture than it was with the Jewish culture of Judea.

In Jesus' time there actually was no coin called a *mite*. However, there was a *mite* in the time of the King James translation, just as there are pennies in our day and during the time when the RSV was translated. The point being made by Mark is the very small amount of money this widow had to give. She was very poor, she was very destitute, and yet she gave her all.

He is clearly so struck by what He sees that He calls His disciples to Him and then says this: **"Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of**

***their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.*** (Mark 12:43-44)

I imagine that all of you in this room have heard this story at one time or another in your life, and you have probably heard sermons given about it in which the meaning behind this event is said to be that Jesus was praising this woman for giving her all to the treasury.

One day, a minister asked the congregation, "Is there anybody here who wants a prayer said on behalf of your shortcomings?"

"Yes," was the answer from a man sitting in the front pew. "I'm a spendthrift. I throw money around like it is growing on trees!"

"Very well," said the minister. "We will all join our brother in prayer – just as soon as the collection plates have been passed."

There certainly is nothing wrong with elders and preachers giving lessons about the goodness of giving, not only of ourselves, but of our monetary means. In other words, giving of our money back to the Lord in which He has blessed us. There are many places in Scripture in which the principle of giving of our means is stressed. 2 Corinthians 9:7 comes to mind whereby the Apostle Paul says of our giving to the church, ***"Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."*** Paul, in his tear-filled departure speech with the Ephesian elders, also quotes Jesus as saying at one time, ***"It is more blessed to give than to receive"*** (Acts 20:35).

First of all, why should we give financially to God? The answer is really quite simple: We should give financially to God because He has given us everything. We just studied last week about the great personal sacrifice He did in giving us His Son, Jesus Christ. He did this because as Jesus said in John 3:16, ***"For God so loved the world."*** When we give back to God we demonstrate one way in which we can express our love back to Him. Let us take a few moments to consider the following passage from God's word found in Deuteronomy 26:10-15:

***10. "And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which You, O Lord, have given me." And you shall set it down before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your God; 11. and you shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.***

***12. "When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within your towns and be filled, 13. then you shall say before the Lord your God, 'I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover I have given it to the Levite,***

***the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all Your commandment which You have commanded me; I have not transgressed any of Your commandments, neither have I forgotten them; 14. I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead; I have obeyed the voice of the Lord my God, I have done according to all that You have commanded me. 15. Look down from Your holy habitation, from Heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the ground which You have given us, as You swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.”***

When the nation of Israel was commanded to give of their means and to tithe in the above passage, as well as others, by giving their tithes the Israelites were proclaiming that they were giving back to the Lord a portion of that which He had prospered them. Just as God had given His people the food and resources they needed for their existence, by tithing and giving the people were imitating Him by giving their God-given food and resources to the slaves, the poor, the sojourners, the orphans, and the widows who lived among them. Thus, tithing and giving was the means God gave the Israelites to express their love to God for all He had given them (also see Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and to express their love to their neighbor as God had expressed His love to them. This is putting into action what Jesus said was the second greatest commandment: ***“You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”*** (Leviticus 19:18)

Listen to what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 8:7-8: ***7. Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us – see that you excel in this gracious work also. 8. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.***

Paul wanted the church in Corinth to be leaders in giving. He did not order the Corinthians to give, but he encouraged them to prove that their love was sincere. When you love someone, you want to give him or her your time and attention and to provide for his or her needs. If you refuse to help, your love is not as genuine as you say.

We should give to God and His Son’s church in order to express our love back to Him. When we give financially, we are showing our love back to God! Therefore, we should give financially back to God to expand His Son’s Kingdom.

We should give financially to God because when we do, we will become rich in every way. Paul wrote further to the church at Corinth, saying in 2 Corinthians 9:10-11, ***10. He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11. You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God;***

God promises that if we give to Him, we will be rich in every way. The Bible describes riches as both spiritual and material. Of all the riches we can possess, none of them is more important than the spiritual riches and blessings we have in Christ. In one aspect, God is saying that we will be rich in spiritual blessings, too.

It is also true that God is telling us that if we give to Him, He will bless us materially. He will provide for our needs. Jesus said in Matthew 6:25-29, **25. "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26. Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"**

**27. "And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? 28. And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; 29. yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."**

I must attach a word of caution here, however: If you have the desire to be wealthy so that you can spend these resources on yourself, do not expect to claim this reward. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6:9-10, **9. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.** The so-called "health and wealth gospel" teaches that Christians should give to get. But God says we should give to get in order to give again (2 Corinthians 9:11). When we are faithful givers, God will provide us with enough to live on and He will provide us with some to give to others.

So how much money should we give to the church? Before we answer this question, we need to bring forth a few biblical principles that will help us determine the amount we should give.

First of all, we need to acknowledge that God owns everything that we have. Everything we possess is merely on loan from God so that we can use His resources to bring Him glory and expand His Kingdom.

Secondly, we need to acknowledge the fact that God has given us the abilities we have to make a living. Listen to what God told the Israelites in Deuteronomy 8:17-18: **17. Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth." 18. You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He Who gives you power to get wealth; that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as at this day.** Since

everything we have is God's, we are mere managers or stewards of His money. So when deciding how much to give, we must keep this in mind.

The *Book of Proverbs* also teaches that God deserves and expects us to give to Him first before anything else. **9. Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; 10. then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.** When we get our paychecks, the first thing we should do is take out what we are going to give to God and then whatever we have left, we live on. If we do it the other way around, then God will get cheated.

We have also seen how God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:6-7). He also expects us to give regularly and in accordance with our income. **1. Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. 2. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come.** (1 Corinthians 16:1-2) When Paul tells the church at Corinth **“to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper,”** Paul gives no legislated amount for the Christian to give. There is no statement about percentages or specific monetary figures in any of the New Testament passages.

So how much money should we give to the church? The answer is you need to determine that for yourself through prayer, study and meditation, remembering the warnings God has given us for cheating Him by robbing and stealing what rightfully belongs to Him. Malachi 3:8-10 says, **8. “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me. But you say, ‘How are we robbing You?’ In your tithes and offerings. 9. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me; the whole nation of you. 10. Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house; and thereby put Me to the test,” says the Lord of hosts, “if I will not open the windows of Heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”**

When we give financially to God we are expressing our love back to Him. We are expanding His Son's Kingdom, which is the church. We will become rich in every way.

Before we give, we must remember these four principals: God owns everything we have; God deserves and expects us to give to Him first before anything else; God expects us to give cheerfully; and God expects us to give regularly and in accordance with our income.

Now that we have seen how it is proper to teach and to preach on the biblical principle of giving of our financial means to the church and supporting its work, let us now examine whether or not the story of the widow giving her last mite is a

story promoting the notion that some believe teaches that we should give our all to the Lord. Is that a proper interpretation?

The story of the widow's gift to the Temple of her last two coins is on occasion described by commentators as "a beautiful story" or as "a beautiful act in the desert of official devotion," and almost universally is seen as some kind of observation on the measuring of gifts, or as an exhortation to "give till it hurts," or as an example of some virtue to be acquired.

And yet, apart from the text, if any one of us were actually to see in real life a poor widow giving the very last of her money to religion, would we not judge the act to be repulsive and to be based on misguided piety because she would be neglecting her own needs? Do we really think that Jesus would have reacted any other conclusion? Do we really think that He would have been enthusiastic over such a donation? This is a very curious story, or more precisely what is curious is the lack of any discussion in commentaries about this substantial problem.

Taken literally, the widow's donation of one mite could have been by obligation, since she could not have given any less. Following this reasoning, some interpreters note that Jesus sits down in judgment **"opposite"** (over against, in opposition to) the treasury. The lesson drawn emphasizes that while people are impressed with the large sums that are put in, they did not notice that the Temple took half of what the "poor widow" had to live on. Connected with Mark 13:1-2 when Jesus said, **"there will not be left one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down,"** the lesson is then interpreted as promising the overthrow of any worship of God sustained by robbery.

However, since the woman would have been under no obligation to give the second mite, when she gave **"her whole living"** she could not have given any more. Following this reasoning, the tale is typically understood by Christians as a condemnation of the rich as they are described, for their inflated self-importance displayed by the ostentatious announcements of their own generosity. Jesus dwarfs this inflated self-righteousness by comparing it to the widow's mite. Also, in light of its proximity to the widow's mite story, Mark 13:1-2 may imply that the widow's worship is of greater value than the Temple. Accordingly, the story is typically taken as an admonition to be wholeheartedly devoted to God, rather than concerned with pleasing men. Although there is a degree of truth in these interpretations, I believe they fall short of the true message that is being given to us.

I believe there is a connection here with Jesus' remarks about Corban in His statement in Mark 7:5-13. In this exchange with the scribes and the Pharisees Jesus condemns their usurping God's authority with man-made doctrines. Please pay close attention to what Jesus says in verses 10-13.

**5. And the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?"**

**6. And He said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; 7. in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' 8. You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men."**

**9. And He said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition! 10. For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die'; 11. but you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God) – 12. then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13. thus making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on. And many such things you do."**

In other words, Jesus said that human needs take precedence over religious values when they come in conflict. God gave the law not for itself but for people, and that religious values are human values in regards to fulfilling the second greatest command, which is to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is the same idea expressed in His own healings He performed on the Sabbath and perhaps in the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. It seems to me that you cannot separate the Corban statement from this widow and the treasury statement. It provides a perfect parallel to the situation of the widow in the story in Mark 12. It would be irrelevant to argue that the widow was elderly and had no dependents (something that is not in the text either), because regardless of her status she had her own personal needs which were just as important as any dependents' needs. Is it likely, then, that the Jesus of Mark Who was offended by such abuses of Corban would be enthusiastic over the widow's contribution whereby she gave all of her money to the Temple, leaving herself with nothing to provide for her needs? Could Jesus be enthusiastic without contradicting Himself? Of all the sayings of Jesus that one might seek to relate to this passage, the Corban text above all, in my humble opinion, must be brought forward – precisely because it seems to contradict, and precisely because it sets limits to the understanding of any of Jesus' sayings on trusting, detachment, poverty, almsgiving, the love of God, etc.

Jesus just spoke of how the scribes were devouring widows' houses, and then proceeded to describe to His disciples how no stone would be left unturned as the Temple was going to be destroyed. This prediction came true in AD 70. It seems to me that Jesus was condemning the religious activity and teaching of His day that would have compelled this woman to believe she had to give literally all of her money to the Temple treasury to be pleasing to God. Therefore, just as Jesus said the scribes and religious leaders had devoured the homes of widows,

God would take revenge by devouring the religion of these men who had usurped God's way, they had profaned His Temple by making it a **"den of thieves,"** they had placed burdens upon the people that even they would not be willing to bear, and so He was going to destroy all that they found precious. The Jewish Temple and city of Jerusalem were going to be devoured, they were going to be utterly destroyed.

There is also significance in the phrase ***And He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury.*** Jesus is demonstrating here His own teaching about not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing in Matthew 6:3, and offering our piety before men. He should not have been able to see how much the people were giving, and as He condemns the Pharisees and the scribes, He tells us why they want the treasury giving to be out in the open. They want it out in the open just so they can **look** religious and **look** pious and **look** as if they are making a great sacrifice before men, even though their hearts are far removed from God. To me, all of these seem more connected and in line with His teaching than praising a widow for giving all of her money that she had, leaving herself bereft with no means to support herself or provide for her needs.

Whatever may be the case, it is clear that in the end Jesus Christ is deserving of all of our love and respect as being our Lord. Paul says in Philippians 2:10-11, ***10. that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in Heaven and on Earth and under the Earth, 11. and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.***