

Mark: How Much Should I Give?

Mark 12:21-44

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Now turn with me, if you would, to the Gospel of Mark and chapter 12, and as it so happens I think Mr. Rogers paved the way for me in his prayer tonight. This is a passage purportedly about, as he put it, money, but I figure it's about something more than that, but it certainly begins there.

The widow's offering at the end of Mark 12, and we pick it up at verse 41. You remember that Jesus has been speaking to various individuals in the temple precincts — the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Sadducees, and most recently the scribes — and they've been asking all kinds of clever questions, far too clever, of Jesus, and Jesus has been responding to them. And now Jesus moves from the Court of the Gentiles which covered the vast area of the temple mount, and now will climb those steps and into what you might imagine to be the temple proper, and into the Court of Women, as it was called, and sits down and observes a few things. And that's what we have before us.

Before we read the passage, let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, thank You once again for the provision of the Scriptures. We thank you that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We ask now for the help and the illumination of the Spirit, that we might read, mark, learn and inwardly digest for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And He sat down opposite the treasure, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasure; and many rich people were putting in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. And calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, 'Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasure; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.'

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Jesus has been in the temple precincts. It's the final week of Jesus' life. We're

not sure now what day it is — it certainly is Tuesday, and it might just be Wednesday of the final week now, and Jesus moves up those steps and into the Court of the Women. It's Herod's temple that is before us, the so-called second temple, and you'll notice the first verse of chapter 13: "As He came out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Look, Teacher! What wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!'" The second temple that Herod expanded was a magnificent structure. The first temple, of course, had been destroyed at the time of Nebuchadnezzar and the beginning of the Babylonian exile. Following the exile, you remember, under the leadership of Nehemiah construction began on rebuilding the temple. That temple was never as good as Solomon's temple. There was always a lamentation about how much better Solomon's temple had been.

Now Herod, in 19 B.C., began to ingratiate himself both to his Roman masters but also to the Jews. To his Roman masters he built an artificial port with a hippodrome and an amphitheater, and a temple which he dedicated to Augustus Caesar and called the place Caesarea. It was the second largest port in the Roman Empire. And in Jerusalem he vastly expanded the temple. It was a construction that began in 19 B.C. It took about ten years to do the most of it, although they were still tinkering with it in 64 A.D., long after Herod was dead. Herod died when Jesus was seven years old and in exile in Egypt. And of course, by the time they'd finished tinkering with the temple in 64 A.D., it was destroyed again in 69-70 A.D. By all accounts the temple now that Jesus is in was a magnificent structure.

I. Jesus sees everything.

And now Jesus observes something. He observes certain wealthy individuals giving of their substance into the temple treasury. He is sitting near the wall of the Court of the Women where there are these thirteen brass receptacles shaped like trumpets, fairly substantial in size, where worshipers, Jewish worshipers, would contribute to the treasury of the temple. And Jesus, we are told, has observed certain individuals who have given of their substance. Rich people are putting in large sums (no checks, of course!), no paper coinage. All of the amounts given would be heard as they were placed in these brass receptacles. You could not only see it but you could certainly hear it making a noise as it went in, and perhaps some of them wished that it did make a noise to make a gesture of what it was they were giving. Perhaps these were the "platinum class" of givers in the temple, and perhaps anxious that plaques be erected in their memory had Jewish law not forbidden it — the "Yaakov ben Slomoh Portico", or even the "Greenspan Treasury Room"!

Now, the Lord Jesus is sitting observing, and He sees this widow woman. And she puts in two small copper coins. Jesus saw what she gave. He saw what she gave. We are told what she gave here. That's a curious thing, isn't it? You know,

we do our best when the plate comes round not to look at what somebody else is putting in it...you know, you don't want to be seen sort of looking to see what people are putting in the plate! I'm always fascinated when I go home to Rosemary's father, the Presbyterian church that he belongs to publishes at the end of the year a list of all the members and exactly the amounts that they've given for that year! You cannot but read it! It's fascinating! As sure as I walk in, I make my way to that, open it up, and we find ourselves! You know, we're saying, "Dr. So-and-So only gave that amount?" It's a way of shaming people, I suppose, but it's a fascinating thing.

The story is told of Dr. John Broadus, famous Baptist preacher and homiletician, and his book on *The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* still utilizes a text in homiletics almost a hundred years now after it was first written. There's a story that says that on a Sunday during the offering he came down from the pulpit and walked up and down the aisle following the plate and observed what people were putting into the plate; and some people were rather embarrassed, and some were deeply annoyed. And then he gets back into the pulpit and begins his sermon and it's on this text. And he said something like, "You're upset with me, but remember that Jesus goes up and down the aisles with every usher and sees every cent." Now, only a Baptist could get away with that, I think!

This woman is a widow. It was difficult to be a widow in the first century. Throughout the period of the Old Testament it was enormously difficult to be a widow: no pension, no government support. Widows were very often extremely poor, utterly dependent on the generosity of others. They would more than likely work from dawn to dusk trying to eke out survival, subsistence money, to find enough food for themselves and perhaps for some of their own dependents. We know the story from Naomi and Ruth and the gleaning in the fields, and so on.

There might have been some who were well provided for, who married wealthy folk and perhaps were left with substantial sums, but as we've already seen in the previous section (verse 40) we read of certain folk who "devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers." These women became prey to certain folk. It was difficult to be a widow. You know in the early church, in Acts 6, that the church is endeavoring to meet the needs of widows, and you remember the discontent between the Greek widows and the Hebrew widows, and we were looking at that passage fairly recently on a Sunday.

James tells us...James, of course, is in Jerusalem, and it was probably even harder to be a widow in the city than it was in the country, where there was perhaps more of a familial and a social concern for widows...but James, who is to be the Bishop of Jerusalem (and James will say that true religion consists in ministering and visiting the widow)...There would be a great contrast perhaps between this woman with perhaps her threadbare clothes and the fairly wealthy individuals that we've just been reading about, who want the important seats and the places of honor in banquets, and she gives two small copper coins.

And Jesus saw it. He sat there, watched it, and took note of it. I want to start there: that our giving is done always in the sight of Jesus, because everything we do is in the sight of Jesus, because there is nothing that is hidden from Jesus. He sees everything.

II. But secondly, Jesus not only saw what she gave, but more importantly He saw her heart.

He saw her heart. Do I need to say it? Yes, I do. It's not difficult to give, say, ten percent of a lot of money. That's not difficult to do, because we don't need a great deal of money to live and survive and have fulfilling lives. But she's giving everything. She's giving everything. She had no savings, no investments, no guarantees, no bank balance. Tomorrow she will rise and try to find some money to buy food. She gives everything. Of all the people in the world, she had the perfect excuse to say 'What possible good are my two small copper coins?'

The translation in the New American says "a cent" — that reflects a translation of a long time ago. It's probably more like forty cents now, but you know, what's forty cents? What possible effect is forty cents going to have on this palatial temple of Herod's? Would the temple treasury have missed forty cents? Absolutely not. She had every excuse, every justification for saying that.

She could have observed the wealthy folk with their amounts, and noted that it made little impact on the style of their lives. It wasn't sacrifice; it didn't cost them anything. And perhaps she could have reasoned, 'Well, God doesn't expect me to give that which I'm dependent on for survival.' And actually, He doesn't.

What possible motive did she have in giving her *lepta duo* (in the original), the two small copper coins worth about (if you're interested)...about seven minutes' worth of the minimum wage? You can work it out. It's about forty cents. You know...was there an urgent call that the temple was in need of repair? No, there wasn't. Had some priest suggested to her that God would see what she would give and reward her? No. You get the impression she gave spontaneously out of the largeness of her heart. You get the impression that here's this woman and she loves the Lord so much that she's prepared to do what perhaps on another occasion we might say is extravagant. She seems to be bursting with love for God as she enters the Court of Women, and the receptacles are there and she says 'Lord, have everything! I want You to have everything!'

You know, Charles Simeon, the famous Vicar of Holy Trinity in Cambridge — he was a minister there for 54 years, and under a great deal of persecution at one point — and he says we might be tempted...if the Bible didn't commend this woman, we might be tempted actually to condemn it. Maybe not her specifically, but condemn the system that extorts money from impoverished, susceptible,

impressionable women. We might say something like ‘You know, all she did was make herself dependent on the generosity of others the next day.’ You know, we might say something about “tough love” and “mercy ministry with integrity,” or warn about the dangers of creating a dependency culture or something. But Jesus observes and commends because she gave everything and she gave the best that she had...not left-overs, not something that she wouldn't miss anyway.

You know, Paul Harvey tells this wonderful story of a woman who calls her telephone helpline service of the Butterball turkey company and asks whether the turkey in her freezer that had been there for 23 years was safe to eat. And the customer service representative said well, it would be OK if the freezer had maintained a below zero temperature throughout that period, but that it probably wouldn't taste very good. And the woman said, “Oh, that's what we thought. We'll donate it to the church!” (It is funny! I laughed, too, when I read it! But it's funny because it's true — that's why it's funny.)

But there's a purity to this woman's motivation. She may not have done the wisest thing in the world, but Jesus wasn't about to point that out — but rather, commends the heart that loves the Lord.

You know, a few weeks ago, here in this church, a student who is attending Jackson State University was brought to the service. Ligon was preaching on Sunday. And she's a member of a church in Gaithersburg, Maryland. And she's here, at least for this semester, and she was attending this church. And after the message one of the interns here was sitting next to her and says that there were tears in her eyes, and she pulled out a five-dollar note and put it into the offering plate. You know, that's all she has. She had nothing else. And I've quizzed, and I've quizzed and I've quizzed, because I couldn't believe that she didn't have more than five dollars, but she doesn't have more than five dollars. She doesn't have a car. She doesn't have to pay gas. She's on the food plan, so she doesn't have to pay for food. Her accommodation has been paid for, so that's all the money that she had, was five dollars...and she was hoping to make it to the end of the month. She put it all — she put it all into the offering plate, a living testimony of this particular passage.

You know, giving says a lot about our heart. Isn't that what Jesus teaches? “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Here's this woman, and she puts in everything, because she loves the Lord.

Now the story is told - I have no means of verifying it — a little girl in church, and when the offering plate comes round she puts in her doll, her treasured little doll. Now this is the doll that she takes to bed with her at night, and gets up in the morning and carries it around under her arm. It's her treasure, and she puts it into the offering plate. And the deacons are touched, and the minister during the course of the week comes round and visits the family and brings the doll with him, and says to the little girl, “I'm giving her back to you.” And the little girl wipes

a tear from her eyes and shakes her head, and says, "No." And when the pastor asks why, she says, "I didn't give it to you. I gave my doll to the Lord."

It's not the amount that Jesus sees here so much, is it? It's the sacrifice. It's the largeness of her heart that Jesus saw, because the heart of the matter is the matter of heart. That's what religion is all about. That's what being a disciple of Jesus Christ is about. It's why Jesus is about to be crucified, so that you and I might consider the cost of our redemption. Because what is it that Jesus gives? Not the left-overs, not those things that He isn't going to miss: He's going to give everything; He's going to give Himself; He's going to give his life for the likes of you and me.

If Jesus really is the son of David and the Son of God...it's been the theme, hasn't it, throughout this chapter: 'Who is Jesus of Nazareth, and why is He here?' And if He truly is the son of David and the Son of God, what sacrifice is there that's too great for me to give?

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." Isn't that what Jim Elliot wrote? He is no fool...she is no fool who gives what they cannot keep, to gain what they cannot lose. And do you know where that will show itself? Yes. In giving...in what Mr. Rogers so wonderfully termed at the very beginning of his prayer tonight "money"...because it's where our discipleship shows itself the least.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, You have a way of putting a sword in our side. You have a way through Your word of convicting us of the paucity of our discipleship. How little sometimes we know what it means to be a disciple of Jesus; how small our love is for You. Forgive us. Forgive us, we pray, and may our hearts brim over with a renewed sense of what it is that we owe You because of the largeness of what You have done for us. Help us, we pray, to give ourselves away to You, utterly and completely, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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