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## The Widow's Mite

a sermon on Mark 12.41-44

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A pastor who talks about money only when the church budget gets tight – and a church that only teaches about stewardship when the budget gets tight – is a lot like the guy who never prays or thinks about God until he gets into trouble. Prayer ought to be a regular part of everyday life. If it isn't, it becomes merely the last refuge of a scoundrel. Giving is also a regular part of everyday life for Christians. The church ought to teach the classic spiritual disciplines through which he honor God and grow more like Christ. Giving is one of the big ones.

I do talk about giving from time to time, although no one enjoys a sermon on it. You are probably entering this one with a sense of dread. There is always pressure to avoid the topic, and it is easy to do that, especially when enough money is coming in. But then things get a bit tight, and maybe the congregation needs a reminder about the joys of giving. The problem with this is, if a pastor only talks about money when the church needs it, people get the wrong idea. They start to think giving is about the church. It isn't. Not primarily. Primarily it is about you and God. The church comes into the picture a distant second or even third. That's why giving needs to be taught regularly, and not just when money gets tight. As I say, I have done some of this. I doubt if have done the topic justice.

I once preached a sermon about hell. Apparently not many pastors ever do that. There was a newspaper article a couple of months ago about how pastors don't preach about hell anymore. Quite a number of you clipped the article and gave it to me. If I didn't know better, I would suspect you want more sermons like that. Seriously, when I preached about hell, I said I try to give that topic about as much attention as Jesus gave it. He mentioned it occasionally, but it was not a bread and butter topic. I confess I have not followed the same approach on the topic of giving, because Jesus talked about money a lot, and I don't. And here's the funny thing about that. So far as we know, Jesus never passed a collection plate. He did have wealthy followers who gave to meet his and his disciples' needs. Luke mentions some of them were women [Lk 8.3]. Judas was the treasurer, so they had a common purse. But so far as we know, Jesus did not pass a bucket when preaching to the multitudes. So why did he talk so much about money?

He did it because how you think about and spend your money is a spiritual matter. God figured out a long time ago that his biggest competitor for the hearts and minds of his people is not some idol or god or philosophy. It is money – money and the things it buys, such as social position and prestige, respect, comfort, and lots and lots of cool, fun stuff. The One True God has seen many pretenders come and go. In the days of Elijah the prophet, many Israelites stumbled into idolatry, worshipping the Canaanite god Baal. By the time of Jesus, nobody worshipped Baal anymore. In the early centuries of Christianity, Mithraism competed with the gospel for souls in the Roman Empire. No one worships Mithras today. False gods come and go, but one rival has haunted the faithful from the beginning and will haunt us until the end: money. Jesus put it bluntly: You cannot love God and money. You have to choose. Love God, and use money as a tool. Otherwise you will love money and try to use God as a tool. You can put your trust in God or money. You can look for security in God or money. Never both.

We all ought to welcome a sermon about giving because our spiritual health is at stake. Giving is not primarily about the church. Giving is about your relationship to God. That's why it was so important to Jesus.

Yes, this is a sermon about giving. We can both get through it – you and I – if you will go along with me a little bit. What I want you to do is think about two relationships: your relationship with God and your relationship with this church. You know me. I am not the arm-twisting, guilt-dispensing kind of pastor. I do not intend to badger the congregation about money. I simply want to hold up gospel teaching and let your conscience and the Holy Spirit lead you how they will.

Consider with me the first of the two relationships, your relationship with God. Where your heart is and what you treasure most determine how you spend and give. Our scripture reading offers insight into how God looks at giving. There is good news, and there is bad news.

First the good news: God does not ask for what you do not have. In our reading, Jesus and his disciples are in the temple. The temple was a large complex that got more and more restrictive the closer you got to the shrine. Anyone could go into the outer courts. That's where the merchants and moneychangers were when Jesus drove them out. Next came the area for Jewish women, then Jewish men, then finally just the priests. As one passed into the area for women, there were large collection boxes, thirteen of them actually, with trumpet-shaped spouts at the top. They may have been something like those donation boxes at malls, into which you drop a coin and it rolls around and around until it finally falls in. The boxes in the temple didn't do that, but you get the basic idea. Anyway, Jesus is there and he watches people giving offerings.

You know what I love about this story? It needs no explanation. Because of cultural differences between first century Palestine and today, many events in the gospels have to be explained. And others, while they may make sense, the more you understand that time and place the more they come alive. This little passage, though, makes perfect sense to us. A lot has changed since then, but people and money haven't.

When Jesus sees the poor widow drop in her meager offering, he calls his disciples' attention to it. He tells them that she has given more than all the others. The literal meaning of the Greek here is that she has given more than all the others *combined*. We are familiar with this story. Most of us grew up hearing it. It does not shock us. It probably shocked the disciples. Jesus wasn't worried about the bottom line. He was worried about the human heart. All the others gave from their abundance. Generous though their gifts were, there was plenty more where that came from. Not so with the woman. She gave all she had, and Jesus marveled at her gift.

This is why I say, God does not ask for what you do not have. He asks for what you have. The woman did not have to give a certain dollar amount. She only had to give sacrificially. The others could have given sacrificially. They did not. They did give, and Jesus did not criticize them. He simply praised her as giving the most.

We have people like that widow among us. I dare say not many, but one or two. As your pastor I make it a point NOT to know who gives or how much. How I treat people has nothing to do with their giving because I do not know their giving. However, on rare occasions a scrap of knowledge takes me unawares and forces itself upon me. In this way, I have learned that there are those among us who are like the poor widow in the gospel. They have nothing extra to give. Every gift is a sacrifice. And yet they do give. I am humbled by that. I am humbled to be the pastor of people who give as the widow gave. Their gift is not a significant portion of the church budget, but that doesn't matter. They do not give for you or for me. They give to God. If every member of our church gave the same amount they do, we'd be broke before long. But, if every member gave the same percentage of their income as these givers, we would have more money than we would know what to do with.

The good news about giving is: God has given you the means to give a great gift. It may not be much in terms of dollars, but to God it is significant. You do not have to give large sums in order to please God, unless you can afford great sums. God asks for what you have, not for what you do not have.

The bad news is: God expects sacrificial giving. Giving a sum you can easily afford does not demonstrate great love for God. For that your offering has to be a sacrifice, which means it has to pinch.

Let me say at this point that I am talking to myself as much as to anyone else. When I was a boy, maybe third grade, I was part of a boy's ministry at the church in which I grew up. It was kind of like Boy Scouts for Jesus. We had workbooks and projects and things like that, and if you did them you could earn pins and badges. I vividly recall one of the assignments. We had to get our father to read John 6.1-15 to us. That's the story of the boy who gave his lunch of five loaves and two fish to Jesus, who then fed the 5,000 with them. I remember my father reading that passage, because he was legally blind, and he would plod through his large print Bible with a magnifying glass. We were then supposed to talk about the meaning of the passage. And finally, I was supposed to give a sacrificial gift.

The next week at our meeting, I showed our leader where my father had signed my book that we had read and discussed the passage. I reported that I gave \$5 to the mission fund. The church of my childhood supported missionaries, just as we support the Morgan family in Bangladesh. A few years back, you may recall, we gave money to help build three churches there. The church of my childhood had a project like that, and I gave to it. My leader asked, "Was this a *sacrificial* gift? Did you have to do without something?" I answered, "That's all I had." It was. At the time, \$5 represented two and a half months allowance, or one good report card, or the money I might get for my birthday. You might argue that I did not forego food, shelter, or clothing, because my parents supplied those things. This is true. But at that time \$5 was a lot of money to me, and it was all I had. I think back to that event, and I wonder, Am I capable of a gift like that now? If you bother to look at the church budget, you know how much I make. I am not getting rich, but \$5 is not a lot of money to me anymore. Since then I have given, sometimes generously, on rare occasion even sacrificially, perhaps, but never again have I given so much. All these years later, that \$5 gift still brings me joy. Do you envy the poor widow in the gospel? I do. What stands between us and following her example? God wants all of us to give sacrificially.

Giving is primarily about your relationship with God. Only secondarily does the church enter the picture. In fact, maybe I should not bring the church up at all. I am going to because I want to make sure all of us have a couple of things straight. Therefore, the second relationship I want you to consider is your relationship to this church.

As you think about your relationship to this church, you need to drill one fact into your brain. You need to grab hold of this fact and squeeze it until it seeps into your blood stream and becomes part of your DNA. That fact is: The church is not an institution and it is not a business. Yes, I know, in many ways it resembles an institution or a business. I can see how one might make the mistake, but there is a big difference. If the church were an institution or a business, your relationship to it would be: How can I get the most out of it while putting in the least?

Think of your favorite store. I have a few favorite places I like to do my shopping. Even though I like these businesses and wish them well, what is my attitude when I walk in the door or log on to their website? "How can I get the most bang for my buck?" I want to get the most out while putting the least in. That's because when I shop, I am a consumer, and that's how consumers think. When I come to church, I am not a consumer. If I were not a pastor, if I were not an officer, if I were a member without leadership responsibilities of any kind, I would still not be a consumer. None of us are, because we are here in response to God's invitation. We cannot approach our life together as a church with a consumer mentality.

If the church were an institution, it would be the same way. We would ask: What do I get out of this? What's in it for me? How can I get by with the least cost to me in terms of time and money? This is how most people feel about government. They want services and benefits but resent taxes. That's human nature. That's not the church. That's not the right way to think about the church. It may not be the right way to think about government, either, in a democracy; but I'll leave you to ponder that.

What is the church? **The church is a group of people God has brought together for the purpose of a common mission.** Part of our mission is to love and support one another, but the larger part is to proclaim the good news, carry on the compassionate ministry of Jesus in this hurting world, and worship God. If that is what the church is, then what question should each of us ask about our relationship to it? How about this one: *How can I contribute to the success of my church's mission?*

The general answer is: You give your talent by giving your time, and you give money as you are able. The specific answers vary from person to person. Some are called to leadership. To succeed in our mission we need spiritual leaders. We need compassionate people with gifts for caring. Those who have those gifts must step up and use them. One part of our mission is, we have children among us (and in our community) who need to learn the faith and experience God's love. How do we help their parents, whose job it is to give them those things? How do we do our part? We need teachers and volunteers.

And of course, everything takes money. The church budget and financial report is always available to anyone who is interested. Mike Sorocak, our treasurer, will open our congregational meeting with a brief update. You can see how we spend money and why. The session and I are always happy to discuss and explain these things.

As I said, I do not know who gives or how much, but I have learned that in 2009 we gave out 114 boxes of offering envelopes. We give those only to members and regular contributors. We have more members than that, of course, but each family gets just one box. Of those 114, we have 90 giving and 24 not. That troubles me for two reasons. First, everyone ought to give something, even if it is just two small copper coins.

Second, I have absorbed enough information to be fairly certain that those 24 are not the poorest 24 families among us. The poorest among us are giving. Who isn't? I don't know, and I don't want to know. God has brought us together and given us a mission. We ought all do our part, even if it is small.

One last thing before I finish. This is the other fact we all need to get straight, because the days ahead will demand steady hands and calm nerves. This fact is: Tight budgets generate conflict.

Every church is a system. It is a web of relationships, a system of routines and expectations. When a system experiences stress, conflict arises. The system wants to get back to normal. It tries to regain equilibrium. Conflict is a symptom of stress in a system.

Budget pressure causes stress to a church system. We are going along pretty well. Most everyone is reasonably contented. But then the economy tanks, and we lose some generous givers to death. Income is not what it was. Expenses never seem to go down. They always go up. Air conditioners break; lightning strikes. Unexpected expenses pile on the usual ones. Basically, money gets tight. Tough decisions have to be made. We have already cut the fat out of the budget, so now we cut muscle and bone. That's the situation and the inevitable result will be conflict.

It may show up at a budget committee meeting, where one might expect it, but not necessarily. It may show up instead at coffee hour or in the choir or as a disagreement between friends. Budget problems cause stress. Stress causes conflict. These are ironclad rules of human endeavor.

So what are we going to do about it? I for one am going to remain calm. Not panic. Not overreact. Not take things personally. Try to listen. Try to compromise. Work with other leaders to find the best solutions possible. I urge all of you to do the same, whether you are a leader or not. Let's try to stay positive. Let's remember who we are. We are recipients of overwhelming grace. We therefore ought to love one another as Christ loves us.

I just wanted to make you aware of all this so you will not be surprised, scared, or confused. We are blessed to have capable, mature leadership on our session; and I am confident they will lead us through these lean times. ...

Well, I congratulate you. You made it through another sermon on giving. What you need to do now is reflect on your giving. What does your giving say about your relationship with God? With this church? How does your giving affect those relationships? Before you worry about the financial health of the church, worry about the spiritual health of your soul. Amen.