

1 Kings 17:8-16

⁸Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ⁹“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” ¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹²But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” ¹³Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” ¹⁵She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Mark 12:38-44

³⁸As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

How Much Can You Afford to Keep?

How many of you out there have written a resume? I’ve determined that I will never leave my job as a pastor. Why? Because I’d have to write another resume! You’re looking at a person who has held over 30 jobs in his life, and I’m not that old; I remember when I’d fill out those job applications that asked you to list all previous jobs, I would ask myself, “Is this worth it?” This company will have already hired everyone they need by the time I finish this application. Employment experts advise you not to write a resume that was more than one page long – that got to be a challenge by the time I was 30. So if you ask me why I’m a pastor, I’d tell you, “I’m lazy.” I don’t want to write another resume or apply for another job; it’s too much work.

I've learned a lot from holding 30 different jobs. One of the things I've learned is that when you get married and have children, you really do "settle down." I averaged about a job a year before I was married; since I've been married it's about a job every four years. Part of the reasons we "settled down" after marriage and parenthood is that supporting a family takes a lot of money, and the longer the stick with one job *usually* the more money you make and the better your resume looks. You're less likely to quite a job over some issue because you need a regular flow of income if you want to support your family.

When you have a family you also tend to focus on careers more than jobs – something that pays well and has a decent retirement plan, or affords you the opportunity to put aside some for your retirement. So after I was married, one career I explored as selling life insurance. My father had done it and managed to support a family, and it seemed like I had the right people skills to do well in this field. I took all my exams and then began learning about sales, and that's where things fell apart. After passing all the tests and learning the products I just could not sell it. Why? It wasn't because I was lazy (I really wasn't) and it wasn't because there's anything inherently wrong with selling insurance (there isn't – in fact you provide a valuable service in selling it). The reason I could not do it was because I felt too weak to resist the temptation of wealth. Maybe that sounds funny; I lot of people say that they would jump at the chance to make a lot of money. Let me explain: In the life insurance business you have a responsibility to not oversell; you can't write a \$50 million policy on some earning minimum wage. But you could *project* what a person could earn in the future, and you worked to get your clients to dream about their future, what lifestyle they imagined themselves living, because you would want them to have an adequate amount of insurance or annuities to ensure that they or their survivors could enjoy that lifestyle. I remember learning to ask customers how much money they would need to maintain the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed. Now I never played a full game of golf in my life, but somehow, when that question was asked, I could see my wife and I on a sunny afternoon out on the fairway, somewhere like Bermuda, with my Jaguar parked at the country club. *That was the lifestyle to which I wanted to become accustomed*, and something in my heart said, "Be careful." I believe that voice came from God.

As I said, there is nothing inherently wrong with selling life insurance, but there is something inherently wrong with pursuing wealth for wealth's sake, and if I were to become an insurance agent I was afraid that my motivation would be to make a lot of money. I know that a lot of us would say, "If I were rich I wouldn't change; I'd give it all away." But wealth does change a person. Statistics show that the more you make, the less you give as a percentage of your total income. If a billionaire donates a million dollars to the church we might be tempted to rename the church or some part of the church after our benefactor, while someone who donates \$100 may only get a "thank you" note, even though that \$100 might be all the money that person had. Who gave the greatest offering? I sold home security systems for awhile as one of my "careers" and I noticed that people with a lot of money had to spend a lot of money to protect all the things they bought with their money. Thank God I recognized my own weakness and I steered away from an attachment to "things."

Let me say right now that if you're looking for pastor who tells you that it's okay to pursue the lifestyle of the rich and famous, you're in the wrong church. I struggle to live a life marked by radical giving in my faith walk, but God help me from ever preaching anything other than radical giving. I believe that most of the churches in the United States are spiritually ill as a result of willful compromise in our discipleship, and one of the biggest stumbling blocks to discipleship is the lure of wealth. Writing in the 1940's, the great theologian Walter Brueggemann states, "The contemporary American church is so enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power **to believe or to act.**" Why are so few people taking church seriously anymore? There are so few people in the churches *who take discipleship seriously*, who take Jesus at his word. We do a lot of talking and a lot of self-justifying, but when it comes to actually following the One we call Lord, we fail miserably, and people take notice. Our critics have reason to have no interest in the church when those in the church who claim to be disciples of Jesus somehow justify their greed or their materialism when they *should* be living according to the example that Jesus set and the things that he taught. We Christians *face a lot of criticism from others because many of them know what Jesus taught, and many Christians don't live up to their expectations.*

Why is Jesus so hard on the scribes in today's Gospel lesson? Because they were like pastors. The scribes are the religious authorities who should know the law and should be setting an example for others. But what are they doing? They're seeking honor and their robbing widows, and Jesus says that they'll receive greater condemnation. *They should!* Any pastor who lives a life of luxury while his/her congregation is starving *deserves* greater condemnation. Likewise any Christian who professes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ while ignoring the plight of others deserves greater condemnation.

And we need to do more than some token action that is supposed to convince others that we are seriously addressing poverty; we need to give radically. What does Jesus find so amazing about this widow who puts a few coins into the offering plate? ***She gives everything she has.*** The scribes give more in terms of total dollar amount, but what *percentage* do they give? Five? Ten? This woman gives 100%, and you can't do any better than that. It's not a lot of money, but it's everything she has, ***AND JESUS RECOGNIZES IT. GOD RECOGNIZES IT.***

Because she gives everything she has, this widow expresses her TRUE FAITH. It takes 100% faith in God to give 100% of what you have. What is the faith percentage of the scribes, who put more money in the offering plate but then turn around and foreclose on a widow's house.

Our fear is always that if we give too much we'll get into a bind. What happens to this poor widow who gives all her money to the treasury? Does she go home and starve? Well Mark doesn't tell us, but we have a story about another widow in our Old Testament reading, a story that has a happy ending; a prophet named Elijah is sent by God to go a foreign land where a widow will feed him. I'm sure Elijah was not expecting fillet mignon; widows were not known to be well-off. But things are worse than he expected; the widow God sends him to meet is collecting sticks to make a fire to cook the last morsel of food she has for her and her son "so they can eat it and die." In other words God has chosen a starving woman to feed Elijah. Quite a

sense of humor God has, doesn't he? She has enough for her and her son to have a last meal, and yet she gives the last of her food to Elijah, and what happens? She and her household eat for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, nor was the jar of oil. God provided despite how dire the situation appeared to be.

Folks, there is a connection between living a life of faith and witnessing the amazing work of God in the world; the more you act in faith, the more you'll see God's wonders. The widow gives her last meal to Elijah, and because of her faithful giving, her jar never runs dry. Many churches in America are in survival mode because they lack the faith to take risks, and so instead they slowly shrink and never see what God could do if only they had faith.

I want you to imagine, if you will, just for a minute, how much you need to support your family. Be honest; don't confuse needs with wants. Even assuming that you stay in your same house and pay the same mortgage, even assuming you really need a car and have a payment to make on it. Even assuming you need to heat your home in the winter and cool it somewhat in the summer. You need insurance and you need a retirement plan. Now think of what you eat each day and ask yourself what you could do without, what you could cook rather than buying already prepared, what you could cut from your diet. Think about the clothes you buy and what the brands are, and what you spend. And what about all the other stuff, what is called **disposable income**. Is that the amount from which you draw church offerings? What about the cable television, the vacations and all you spend on entertainment. How much could you do without? For most of us I think we could say we could cut out quite a bit, and you don't have to give all that to the church; I'm sure you know people who need help, and if you don't I can provide you with some names. Who in the world could benefit from that money? How many lives could you save in a day? How many people who truly need help could be helped?

Our pride tempts us to declare, "But we are generous! Look at how much we give to other nations in need! Look at how much we support our own citizens through public welfare, through our tax dollars!" Our pride also causes us to look for scapegoats; "you know how selfish my cousin is? Look at how much money that person wastes on luxuries!" But remember that this is not about other people; we all must stand along before God, and he's not going to ask you if you gave more or less than somebody else; he's going to want to know how much you gave. And it's not about how much we give; it's about how much we withhold. It's about how much faith you put in God to take care of your needs and how well we attend to the needs of others with what God has given us. Do you have enough faith in God to care for your needs that you would be able to give your last dollar to someone else?

Your tendency may be to label a pastor like me as insane to advocate such a level of giving. Either you'll say I'm irresponsible for advocating such radical giving or that I have some ulterior motive to line my own pockets or to fill the church coffers. I'll be honest: I have a vision of a church where the congregation completely supports the ministries of the church without having to rely on interest gained from the investment of gifts from previous generations. I dream of a church where a Cranberry Festival is about raising money for the hungry and the

homeless and the sick and the needy rather than raising money for the church itself. And I dream of a church where members are so committed to Jesus Christ that they give, not only of their finances but of their time and their gifts and their presence and their *lives* so that the church really is a powerful force in world transformation. That's what Jesus envisioned the church to be when he started it 2000 years ago, but somehow we've gotten off track.

How do we get it back on track? There are no shortcuts; it requires nothing less than a commitment on the part of Christians to live the lives that Jesus calls us to live, and the more we commit ourselves to that lifestyle the more effective we will be in transforming this world.

Now I'll be the first to admit that the kind of life we are called to live as Christians is radically different from the way most of us live, and the temptation is to throw our hands up and say, "I can't do it." But I ask you to do two things: The first is to admit that you CAN do it, and the truth is that you WON'T do it. Admitting that will perhaps free us from pride and self-righteousness. The second thing I ask you to do is to simply do *something*. Just as Jesus told the scribe last week, "You are not far from the kingdom of God," we are not quite there either. Perhaps some of us can make the radical changes that will allow us to truly cross that threshold, to really dwell in the kingdom of God, placing our complete trust in God and withhold nothing from God. But if you're not able to take such a leap of faith at this moment, I urge you to take a step. What I don't want you to do is label the pastor a lunatic and go find a "church" that compromises the word of God in order to justify selfishness and indifference. Nor do I want you to resign yourself to the notion that you are a sinner forever stuck in your ways; you're a sinner as I am, but we are never stuck in our ways; God is working in us if we allow him to, so allow him to do that.

If you take a step, either little or big, toward a radical giving I know your life will be blessed. Instead of thinking in terms of "What can I get for myself or my family?" and thinking instead in terms of "What can I give to someone else?" you will find joy beyond measure, and perhaps, just perhaps, you'll sense that you really are dwelling in the kingdom of God.