

## Mark 12:38-44

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

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.<sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.<sup>43</sup>Then 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.<sup>44</sup>For 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.’

### When Our Life Turns Right-Side Up

You’re familiar with the story of the widow’s mite, aren’t you? It’s great to be reminded that it is not the *amount* of money that we give that’s important but rather the *heart* of the giver. A wealthy person may be able to afford giving hundreds or even thousands of dollars every week to a church, but what has that person *sacrificed*? What was the tradeoff for that offering? When we speak of sacrifice we speak of cost, and if your gift to the church in no way inconveniences you, there is no sacrifice, but if you give to the extent that you have to give up something – a meal or a night out with the family – then you are giving *sacrificially*. In our gospel lesson we find a widow who gives two measly coins, two pennies, as her offering, and Jesus draws our attention to it, because those two pennies, while holding hardly any value compared to the gifts of the wealthy, were everything this poor woman had.

In one sense we find a comfort from this story; if we’re poor we’re reminded that the total sum of what we give is not that important. But we’re also left feeling a bit uncomfortable with this story, because Jesus commends a woman who offers everything she has to the church, and we say to ourselves, “Wow! I could never do that.” And in our effort to justify the proportion of our wealth that we decide to give to the church we appeal to the laws of common sense. Common sense tells us that if we have only a few cents to our name we *conserve*, and we choose to spend what little we have on what we call the bare necessities – food, shelter, and clothing. I would guess that all of you at some time in your life had to cut back on spending. Maybe you lost a job, or had unexpected bills from doctors or hospitals or had to do some major home repairs. And so you sit down with your bills and you start cutting back...on eating out, or on vacation plans, or contributing less to your retirement account, or cutting back on your church offerings. I would guess that a lot people spend a lot agonizing moments wondering how much they should cut from their tithes and offerings, listening for thunder in the distance. And I doubt that there are many people who, when faced with a serious financial crisis, would act as this poor widow acts and put all the money you have into the offering plate. So in that sense this story upsets us; our common sense tells us that this woman has no common sense. If anything she should give LESS to the church, not more.

But if the action of this widow unsettles us the words of Jesus should unsettle us even more. Jesus says to us over and over again in so many different ways that we owe God everything that we have. Yes, the Old Testament wisdom is that ten percent of our income should go to the Church – that number is derived from the Law and the prophets. But Jesus goes much further than this:

Consider the rich young prince who asks what he must do to inherit the kingdom.

Consider Jesus' statement: "Anyone who wishes to be my disciple must take up their cross daily and follow me."

Consider that "would-be" disciples who comes up to Jesus and says I'll follow you, but first let me say goodbye to folks, and Jesus answers, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

He says, "Those who seek to keep their lives will lose it, and those who lose their lives for my sake will find it."

All of those verses and stories suggest that there is not a minimum acceptable offering to God. It's clear to me that Jesus is calling us to give up everything, and we're not used to that level of giving. In fact we would consider such extravagant giving to be foolish. We meticulously mete out our money in ways that ensure our financial health and good credit rating. When our fortunes are good we may give slightly more to a church, but if our fortunes turn for the worse our church is too often the first thing we cut back on. And I would suspect that if we knew that those two coins that the widow puts in the offering box were her last, we would not commend her as Jesus did; we might scold her for being so irresponsible with her money. "Look at how foolish she is with her money. She'll never get ahead as long as she fritters away her money like that."

But Jesus does not chastise her; he commends her. In a very real sense this woman is giving much more than two coins. She is giving her entire life. To say the least we are uncomfortable with that level of giving. We want to know that if we give slightly more than what we're comfortable giving that God will take care of whatever it is that makes us so uncomfortable about giving so much. We give with the expectation that we will reap dividends. And so we withhold, and as long we withhold our money, we also withhold our time and our presence and our prayers and our *lives* from God. Let me tell you a story, a story pretty common to people who have "answered a call" from God – and this is not a story that's exclusive to pastors; there are plenty of people who have answered God's call and have not become pastors or priests. One thing that happens when a person hears God calling is that their life is turned upside down. I don't know of anyone who didn't experience some kind of crisis when God called them. Most were living very safe, secure lives, had good jobs and a bright future. And suddenly everything changes. Suddenly they look around at their safe, secure life, their perfect fairy tale existence, and none of it appeals to them anymore. They realized that *nothing in this world can satisfy the longing of our hearts except God*. And for most everyone who answers God's call there is a realignment of values – the home they live in, the car they drive, the vacation destinations, the cable television plan that they subscribe to, and even their job and their salary don't seem to matter anymore. For nearly everyone who answers this call there is a time of great financial

uncertainty. One could say that their lives are turned upside down, but anyone who has answered the call knows that what's really happening is their lives are turned right side up. God becomes so real to them, and he becomes the most important factor in their lives, and they lose their fear of the unknown knowing that "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and they can offer themselves as a living to God.

But what happens when we fail to offer our total selves to God? Nothing. Life continues to go on like it has before, but we end up sliding down this slippery slope of writing God completely out of our lives. I've gotten in the habit lately of asking folks, "Where have you seen God in your life lately?" It's easy to forget that God is active in our lives, even active in the church. So often at our church meetings we're in a hurry to get down to business, so we say a 20-second prayer asking for God's blessing upon our meeting then carry on with our task oblivious to God's presence with us. So now I slow things down a bit, and spend some time going around the table and sharing our experiences with God, which reminds everyone at the table that God is not only present but doing things, amazing things in our lives.

That little exercise not only enhances our awareness of God in our lives; it also increases our *trust* in God, which enables us to *give* more to God, and not just money; we also give our presence, our prayers, our gifts, our service, and our *witness*, which is our testimony that God is doing things in our lives. We need to build our trust in God, but we can't build it if we don't take the risk of trusting God with our lives in the first place.