

How God Evaluates Giving

Mark 12:41-44

God does not want what you have—he wants you.

Some mistakenly think that God asks for their service, and their time, and their money, because he needs those things. He doesn't. The sun will sooner ask you for a blanket because it's cold, than God will ask you for your money because he's poor.

God does not esteem your money half so much as others do. In fact, God thinks nothing whatsoever of your money. He regards it as nothing, even as less than nothing and worthlessness.

When you extend your hand to God and say, "Here, I offer you a tenth of all my income," that is fine, but he would rather have the hand than what is in it. When you say, "Lord, you can have the very shirt off my back," he would rather have the heart underneath it.

Would you, like the Israelites of old, try to satisfy God with the sacrificial oxen? God is not concerned about oxen, is he? He owns the cattle on a thousand hills, and the money in a million banks. He does not require of you any burnt offering but this: that you would offer yourself as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

You cannot this morning bring some external offering and lay it on the bronze altar, wipe your hands and then return home in peace. God is calling for no less than this, that you would yourself ascend the altar stairs and lay your own head upon the woodpile.

You must yourself be like Isaac, who said to his father Abraham, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Isaac was the lamb for the burnt offering—and so are you.

Millions are filling churches this morning in America, and the eyes of the LORD are moving to and fro across the land, not to find some rich person who can give him much, or some talented individual who can offer him assistance—but to find this one person: the one whose heart is completely his.

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With that in mind, let's consider Mark 12:41-44.

MARK 12:41-44

Jesus has walked beyond the temple's broad outer court, known as the Court of the Gentiles, and has entered another, a smaller one which stands nearer the temple building itself. He is now in the Court of the Women, so named because both Jewish men and women were allowed to enter there.

And there he sits, perhaps upon some steps, and watches. We imagine Jesus may be somewhat fatigued—he has that day defeated in a verbal spar the many religious leaders who approached him. He has done battle, so to speak, by means of his mouth, and has left his enemies undone on the battlefield.

But now he lays aside his weapon and sits down, and the Lion of Judah softens to show that he is also the Lamb of God. Out of the strong comes something sweet. We find beneath the steely exterior of this battle-hardened Jesus rests a tender heart.

Let us see then what Jesus sees as he sits there, in the temple, and what he says about what he sees.

The scene

From where Jesus sits he sees thirteen large, metal, trumpet-like objects. These are the receptacles into which the pilgrims at Passover and the inhabitants of Jerusalem are, one by one, pouring their contribution of coins for the upkeep of the temple. Each receptacle was labeled: two were for the temple tax, one for the purchase of young pigeons, one for turtle-doves, one for wood, one for incense, one for the gold of the mercy-seat, and six for freewill offerings.

And to these depositories, as Jesus quietly watched, came men of great importance. Who could help but notice when one would untie the top of his heavy sack, and let slide down along the metal opening a rush of gold and silver coins? Notice too that there are not a few such shows that day—verse 41 says that “many rich people were putting in large sums.”

We assume that some of the rich were practicing their righteousness before men to be noticed by them. Perhaps a pompous scribe, with

head upheld, is unloading into the opening a widow's livelihood which he had stolen.

But others may have had no ill intent. We do not really know because Jesus gives them very little attention. He sees not as man sees—men and women were seeing the wealthy patrons and their lavish contributions, the glisten of the gold, the health and vigor of the well fed. But Jesus' eyes are fixed on one lowly woman who walks behind them. Jesus looks at the solitary poor widow.

The widow

So then, let us look at her too, and attempt to see in her what Jesus saw. Look at verse 42: "A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent."

Before we can proceed in our text, we must gaze steadily at the woman, like Jesus does. We must not merely glance at her as the crowds might. What is the state of this overlooked worshipper?

Alone

Note, first, that she is alone.

Although your English translation may not reflect the fact, the description of the woman in verse 42, in the Greek, begins with the word, "one." And that, it appears, is present in order to contrast her with the rich in verse 41, who were "many," though she was only "one."

Which well reminds us that this woman is quite alone.

How did her day begin? We do not know if she lived with relatives, though the fact that she had only two small copper coins to live on advises us against that thought. At least, if she did, they were quite poor themselves and likely had to work long hours. Did she have children? Again, we do not know.

It is probable that she walked unnoticed through the busy streets of Jerusalem that day, unaccompanied, without the joy of pleasant communication and friendship, and then slipped quietly into the Court of the Women to make her contribution. Like the Proverb says, "Wealth adds many friends, // But a poor man is separated from his friend."

Yet the sadness of her state is multiplied when we consider that it was not always this way.

Widowed

For note, secondly, this woman is a widow.

I imagine that, on the day she was married, she was full of joy and expectation. She had a husband and security and immediate and promised provision. She was socially acceptable and normal, a companion to other brides and attached also to her husband's family.

But then God took away her husband. And with him went many other joys which she possessed. Her happiness was pierced by the pain of loss, her financial safety net tore across, and she was left to fall until, as we find her here, she was a solitary poor widow.

No longer did she have her closest companion, her Adam and protector and lover. She was thrown out of the warmth of that relationship onto the icy plane of a cold and lonely world, with only the memories of her former friend.

And beyond that, she was no longer so young as she was when she married. We may imagine that her beauty, as all beauty must, had moved beyond its blossoming day and now was wilting and browning around its edges.

Poor

And, finally, note that she was poor.

As her loneliness resulted from her widowhood, so did her poverty. Although today a widowed woman can find work in the public sector to support herself, it was not so in this widow's day. We do not know by what means she got on—perhaps she lived by alms begged on the streets, or some other charity. But she managed only to make, in one day, two small copper coins.

These coins were called *lepta*—the word means “small”—and they were the absolute smallest coin in circulation there in Palestine. About a centimeter across and very thin, at a distance you might hardly see them in her hand. In today's money they were, very roughly, probably worth about fifty cents apiece. So in a day the woman made a dollar—enough to buy one bath in the public bathhouse, and very little else.

Her gift

So here is this woman, whom we have gazed steadily at, standing humbly in the temple, preparing to make her donation to the treasury. God has taken almost everything away from her. She is alone, with few

friends and accompanied only by the pain of what she has lost; her youthful beauty and vigor has fled; and in her hand sits all that she has left in this world.

It is not uncommon, when someone suffers so much loss, to hear that he or she has become angry at God. Naomi had taken to herself the title Mara, or “bitter,” when her husband and two sons were dead, for she felt that the Lord had dealt very bitterly with her. When you watch God set before you what you love, and then snatch it away one piece at a time, that is a life of many deaths, and certainly there is the temptation to be angry.

Yet look again at this widow. We are not surprised to see her suffer so much, for many people have suffered her lot and far worse. But we are surprised at this:

The widow approaches a receptacle, there in her hand sit the only things that God has yet to take from her. It is as if she looks to heaven and says, “My God, you have taken away everything—and I do not ask for any of it back. My only request is this: that you would take that little bit of me that I still hold to.” And with that those metal motes slide off her palm, down into the treasury, and are irretrievably lost in the abundant offerings of the rich.

And in that modest moment, the angels exploded into rapturous applause. Heaven itself was full of hearty laughter and irrepressible joy. And the very heart of God was warmed. Those two lepta comprised one of the biggest contributions that God had ever received from the hand of mankind.

And this woman, who gave with the desire that God, and no other, would see and be delighted with her gift, could hardly have guessed that God was sitting just across from her, watching.

Your lepta

Christian, you may well feel that, indeed, you have nothing to offer to God but the widow’s two coppers. But know this: star differs from star in glory, and this is not by some astral accident—God has fashioned them all to glow at different luminosities. And so it is with the church. Saint differs from saint in glory, in present usefulness. But the least of these may give the most, if his or her heart is right, if he is willing to give all that he has rather than lamenting all that he does not.

I offer you my own example: I feel that I have been given only two *lepta*, if not one, in the area of social grace. When I have poured my efforts fully into conversation, I finish exhausted, having made uncomfortable myself and my poor conversant. All the while I look right and left and find that many rich are affluent in society, and find it very easy to converse with ease and tact. But then comes to me this thought, "I need never speak as easy as they do—that is their gift and I am glad for it. But God is not the less pleased with me because I cannot do what he has not designed me to do well. I will cast all my efforts, both my *lepta*, into that which I am able to do, that which God has given me to accomplish."

This is why we are one body with many members, because none of us is able to do all. And if you will do what God has given you to do, and do that with all your might, undeterred by what you are unable to do, then the body will function well—but, more importantly, then you will hear from Jesus, who sits watching you across the court and sees you drop your petty change into the treasury, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Saint, do not sit idly by, and do not bury your coin in a handkerchief because it seems so petty to you, and not as glorious as the five and ten coins of others. Find what you can do for God, and do it. For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.

Let everyone examine himself or herself now and say, "O God, what are my *lepta* which I can give to you?"

For some, it will be your money. And I will not say, "Just be careful not to be as extreme in your giving as this widow." No—give as you have purposed in your heart, under no compulsion, freely like the widow gave. But if that be all that you have, so be it. You are not in bad company.

For others it will be something else. Surely there is a *lepton* in your pocket for Jesus. Are you shut in at home? Write letters to encourage the saints, and you act no less nobly than the greatest evangelist. Are you of a timid temperament? Well, can you not at least give someone a gospel tract, or leave one to be found? Jesus is always watching these small contributions, and the sound of their falling into the treasury, though it be a noise hardly perceptible to others, yet rings pleasantly in his ears.

Jesus' assessment

So then, Jesus has witnessed the precious event. Now he calls his scattered disciples to himself, at the outset of verse 43. Remember that when, in chapter 11, Jesus entered this great city of Jerusalem, the general expectation was that he would take the earthly crown and reign over Israel as a noble Son of David. The people had cheered all around him at his entrance and cried out, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

The disciples likewise show, time and again, that they expected this of Jesus. So then, when Jesus calls together his disciples, having defeated his religious opponents, being so near to the temple building, during the holiest week of the year, Passover, when the masses were gathered there, how could they help but anticipate that at any moment Jesus would unveil his plan and wage war against the Romans. High and revolutionary thoughts were in the disciples' minds.

But Jesus has something more important to tell them. He points out the unnoticed widow, and says, in verses 43 and 44, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; 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."

Materially speaking, the widow did not outdo the other contributors. The simple fact is that they gave gobs of silver and gold, and she gave two slender pieces of copper. What then does Jesus mean when he says that she gave more than them?

He explains: The rich gave more compared to the widow, but less compared to themselves. Their numbers were higher, but their percentages were lower. They gave comfortably, out of their excess, what they could spare. It was no problem to shave a little off the top of their earnings, because it would grow back.

In other words, the rich acted no differently than an absolute atheist, in the same circumstance, would have acted. If there was no God in heaven, the rich would have lost nothing. They still had the safety of their own finances to fall upon, and they received some recognition for their giving too. It was a no-risk investment, and the only individual glorified in the transaction was the giver.

But the widow gave out of her poverty, and she gave everything. If there were no God in heaven, she would starve; she staked her whole

life upon this fact: there is a God, he is worthy of all I have and am, and he will care for me. Even when her circumstances would suggest to her, “God doesn’t care for you! He has ripped from you every simple pleasure you’ve ever known.” Even in the face of these accusations the woman stood resolute in her faith and, like Job before her, refused to curse God. Her refrain was, “God is still good, God is still good.” And that says more about God to a watching world than all the petty donations of the rich.

Conclusion

God does not want what you have—he wants you.

Some will say the widow was imprudent, that she should at least have kept one of her coins for herself. And yet that gentle Lamb, who sat across from her that eventful day in quiet observation, only a few days afterward would kneel down in a garden and the same test would be put to him: “Will you give everything that God might be glorified?” And his reply would be, “Father, Your will be done.”

What would become of you if Jesus had gone halfway, and given only one of his two coins? Why would anyone bother to stop and ponder over the story of a savior who stopped just short of saving mankind. No, Jesus let both *lepta* slide from off his palm—a man of sorrows in his life, he gave still more in his death, all that he had.

And will you who do not love God refuse him the same? He has done much more than he asks of you. He has taken hell on the cross that your sins might all be forgiven—and he does not ask you to take hell also, but only to reach out by faith and take heaven.

Do not offer him your useless surplus each Sunday. Let the two *lepta* fall from your hand right now, why do you hesitate? Surrender what you have left, and you will gain what you can never lose—God himself. Do not worry about what you can or cannot give him, for he does not want what you have—he wants you.