

TRUE WEALTH

(MARK 12:38-44)

³⁸ As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.

⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything-- all she had to live on."

Introduction: Today's Gospel reading contains a very simple story about a woman who is not even named in the text. Let's see what we can learn for this passage oftentimes overlooked passage of Holy Scripture.

I. Watch Out → A Big, Bad Show!(12:38-40)

12:38 – “**Teachers of the law**” are known as the “scribes” in other Bible translations. The scribes’ professional occupation was to systematically study and teach the Scriptures and what was known as the “tradition of the elders” (see Mark 7:1-13; Matthew 15:2-6). In other words,

these were the religious experts of the day, and were highly respected by the Jewish people. How shocking that Jesus warns His hearers to **“watch out”** for them!

12:38-40 – Jesus uses the following expressions to show that these men were actually quite pretentious, conceited, and self-absorbed: [1] **“they like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces,”** [2] **“the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets,”** and [3] **“for a show make lengthy prayers.”** Rather than actually helping others (as was their calling), they needed their egos stroked by feeling important. Rather than being a servant to others, they were slaves to their own egos.

12:40 – **“Devour widows houses”** refers to how some teachers of the law would manipulate people such as widows, whether rich or poor, by getting money unscrupulously from them. They were not allowed to get paid a regular wage for their religious services but were dependent upon the donations from others. This system could easily be abused when greed entered in.

The consequences for their self-adulation and greed was just in that **“such men will be punished most severely,”** by God, of course.

∴ It is so encouraging when we see believers (especially leaders) who are focused on God’s call and will rather than being consumed with the opinions of others, as the Apostle Paul makes clear in Galatians 1:10:

Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

II. Look at This → The Real Standout! (12:41-42)

12:41 – **“The temple treasury”** was located in what was known as the court of the women, where both men and women were allowed to enter. There were thirteen trumpet shaped boxes into which people could present their offerings.

12:42 – **“Two very small copper coins”** (*lepton*) refer to the smallest coin circulated in Palestine which was worth one sixty-fourth of a denarius, which was the daily wage for a common laborer.

“Only a fraction of a penny” translates the Greek word *kodrantes* which is a transliteration of the Latin *quadrans*, a Roman coin worth one sixty-fourth of a denarius. “A fraction of a penny” is not entirely accurate according to our own monetary standards. If a denarius is worth, say, \$80, then this is more like \$1 or \$2.

∴ Jesus is certainly not criticizing the “rich people” who gave “large amounts” of money. It is a good thing to generously give, whether one is rich or poor. People are naturally impressed with

big donations. For example, if Bill Gates were to give \$2,000,000 to build a new recreation center in Waldport, we would all be ecstatic. However, if someone else were to sacrificially donate a few dollars, we wouldn't think twice about it. The point is that Jesus is looking at the heart. The Almighty God who owns "the cattle on a thousand hills," the entire "world" is His (Psalm 50:10-12), is impressed with our heartfelt devotion and dedication to Him. Are we depending upon Him above all else or are we out to make an impression on others?

III. Get This → True Wealth and True Poverty (12:43-44)

12:44 – What a contrast of this "poor widow" and the scribes mentioned in 12:38-40! She "gave" her "all" in genuine faith and thankfulness to God, while they would greedily "devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers" (12:40). Jesus so wonderfully got to the core of spirituality, rather than being caught up with the superficiality of society's standards.

Practical Application

This is the last narrative in Jesus' public ministry recorded by Mark. In chapter 13 our Lord goes on to give His infamous Olivet Discourse in which He talks about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as well as judgment at His second coming. Do you know what the main focus is after that in Mark's gospel (chapters 14-16)? Preparation for Passover, the Lord's Supper, Jesus' betrayal, arrest, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection.

You see, the sacrificial gift of this "poor widow" points to the sacrificial gift of our Lord and Savior. She gave away her livelihood, but He gave His very life. This concept is brought out beautifully in 2 Corinthians 8:9:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that though He was rich,
yet for your sakes He became poor,
so that you through His poverty might become rich.

You and I are eternally grateful for Jesus' mission, the greatest rescue operation for all eternity → the cross and empty tomb. Our Lord prophesied this early in Mark 10:45, the theme verse of that Gospel:

The Son of Man came not to be served,
but to serve,
and give His life
as a ransom for many.

He, and His precious gift of eternal life, is our greatest treasure. We are “rich” in Him. He delights in pouring out His gracious blessings upon us, His people.

How we use our own personal wealth, talents, abilities, time, and other resources (which are all gracious gifts of God to begin with!) is a reflection of our priorities, whether temporal or eternal, whether self-absorbed or Christ-centered, whether close-fisted or openhanded, whether miserly or merciful.

When this “poor widow” gave her all at the temple, she wasn’t looking for accolades or a huge fanfare. She was looking to a loving God who had graciously given her hope and tenderly poured out His compassion upon her time and time again in her life. She recognized that He, and He alone, was by far her greatest treasure in this life and the one to come. He, and He alone, was worthy of her worship, adoration, and devotion.

Just as this incident of personal sacrifice points so marvelously to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for us and for all humanity, so our lives, our giving, yes, our personal sacrifices, point to the Ultimate Giver – our crucified and resurrected Savior who is with us and continually seeking to bless us ... for all eternity.

Let’s not be so coy, so bashful, or so consumed with our own plans and problems, that we miss out on opportunities to give and meet the needs of others. The King of the universe is calling us to make eternal investments in His kingdom.

Remember that beautiful message in 2 Corinthians 8:9? Here are more verses from that same context:

^{8:1} And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. ⁵ And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.

¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

^{9:7} Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

You and I cannot out-give God. Here is a story that should give all encouragement to trust our loving Lord and step out more boldly, and joyfully, in faith:

The Colgate-Palmolive Company is one of the oldest in America, going back about 200 years. It was started by a young man named William Colgate. He left home at sixteen years of age to seek his fortune, and everything that he owned in this world was tied in a bundle that he carried in his hand. But as he walked along on his way to the city, he met an old neighbor, the captain of a canal boat, and the words the old man spoke to him on that day stayed with him his entire life.

“Well, William, where are you going?” asked the canal boat captain.

“I don’t know. Father is too poor to keep me at home any longer, and says I must make a living for myself now.” William went on to say that he had no skills, that he didn’t know how to do anything except make soap and candles.

“Well,” said the old man, “let me pray with you and give you a little advice.”

There in the pathway, the two of them – a teenager and an old man – knelt down and the man prayed earnestly for William. Then, rising up, the boat captain said this: “Someone will soon be the leading soap-maker in New York. It can be you as well as anyone. I hope it may. Be a good man; give your heart to Christ; give the Lord all that belongs to Him of every dollar you earn; make an honest soap; I am certain you will yet be a prosperous man.”

When William arrived in New York, he had trouble finding a job, but he followed the old man’s advice. He dedicated himself to Christ, joined a church, and began worshiping there. The first thing he did with the first dollar he earned was to give 10% of it to the Lord’s work. From that point on, he considered ten cents of every dollar as sacred to the Lord. In fact, he soon began giving 20% of his income to the Lord, then he raised it to 30%, then to 40%, then to 50%. And late in his life, he had become so successful that he devoted the whole of his yearly income – 100% of it – to the Lord’s work.

And even today, this morning, about 200 years later, some of you brushed your teeth or washed your faces with products from that young man’s factory.

[Taken from *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories*, p. 344]

Numerous people in our own congregation can personally testify to the joys of giving and God's manifold blessings as we reach out in faith, as this "poor widow" did 2,000 years ago. Let's more boldly and faithfully give, as Jesus commands us in Luke 6:38: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Rejoicing in the greatest Treasure of all – the Person and Work of Jesus Himself,

Pastor Steve Waterman