

Text: Mark 12.38-44
St Stephen's

Nov 7/8, 2009
Sat/Sun

God's Givers

Our lectionary readings take us to the popular subject of money today, and this week and next we will speak to it. It is good to talk about money and about giving for a few important reasons. (we have a lot of visitors here – I always wait for lots of visitors!)

We Stand in Good Company

First, speaking true words about money and possessions puts us in good company, namely, with Jesus. About 15 percent of everything Christ said relates to this topic – more than his teachings on heaven and hell combined!

Think of some of the **sayings** that came from his lips...

- *"Your life does not consist in your possessions"* Luke 12:15
- *"Sell your possessions and give alms; provide yourselves with purses in heaven"* Luke 12:33
- *"You cannot serve God and money..."*

Think of some of the **people** he met...

- The **rich young ruler** who couldn't let go of his wealth
- The **greedy tax collector Zaccheus**, who gave half his wealth to the poor
- About the **farmer** who wanted to build more and more barns and forfeited his life
- About the **steward** who buried his treasure and missed his chance
- About the **shrewd manager** who used wealth to be merciful to his friends and took his chance

Over and again Jesus is relentless in his call to **living light and giving large**. And that is a good description of **his own living and giving**. So we are in good company with Jesus.

Here's another reason to talk about generosity:

God Multiplies Our Giving

People are always looking to **leverage** their influence and their possessions these days. To leverage something means you get it to do more than it would normally be able to do. The bible teaches that **when you give for God's purposes in the world, he comes in alongside you and multiplies your giving.** Think of the moments in Jesus' ministry where this happened:

- A young boy gave a sack lunch to Jesus and he used it to feed 5000 people.
- Another family gives Jesus an upper room for an evening, and in that room he gave a meal that has fed more people than any meal in the history of humanity
- Another man gives a grave to Jesus and he rises from it

The list is long: it is David's sling that brought down Goliath, Moses' staff which split the sea, the expensive ointment that soothed Jesus' skin the night before he died, the stranger's shoulder that took the burden of the cross off Jesus' flayed back as he walked towards his terrible, wonderful death. All were ordinary gifts, **given to God, multiplied by God, to extraordinary effect.** It happens all the time. If you want to make a difference in the world, learn how to be one of God's givers.

Here's another reason to talk about generosity:

Giving People Are the Happiest People on Earth

If you personally were set free to give the way the New Testament talks about giving, you would be among the happiest people on earth. Jesus repeatedly promises that a life of simplicity, with a **governor** on your spending and a **passion** to advance his kingdom through giving, will bring a far happier life than a life of luxury. And I can say I have seen this in the presence of real suffering. And I can say it because of what the Bible teaches:

Proverbs 14:21, *"Happy is he who is gracious to the poor."*

Proverbs 22:9, *"He who is generous will be blessed."*

Acts 20:35, *"It is better to give than receive"*

After 30 years of pastoral ministry, I can say without hesitation that the **most generous people** I have known are **the happiest people** I have known. God's givers are blessed people.

One of the most memorable incidents of giving in the Bible comes in the last week of his life. Jesus was exhausted from a long day of confrontation and controversy that came as he taught in the Temple.

"and he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums."

Mark 12:41

As you came into the Temple precincts there was **the treasury area** where there were 13 chests with trumpets rising out of them, for the various offerings of the people of God. As people came to worship, they brought their tithes and offerings and poured them into offering boxes. If your **offering was large**, there could be quite a sound as your coins emptied into the chest – and you could quite easily, without any special effort at all, be well noticed as your offering was made. The coins themselves would make **different sounds**; gold and silver and copper would each have a distinct clink as they fell down into the chests.

Jesus sat down and watched. We noted last week how **he looked carefully** at people, and saw things that we often miss. He saw deeper than the externals, and we are told **he has compassion** on them. There is no hint that he felt differently here. Mark goes on with the story.

"Many rich people put in large sums."

Everyone would have noticed that. It is easy to notice when giving is public and prominent. Jesus also noticed when wealthy people gave large amounts for the sake of God's work through the temple.

What happens is that we often think that people like that are the **major players** in the story of how God resources his ministries. But as important as their offerings are, there are other givers who give even more. We are about to meet one.

"And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny."

Mark 12:42

Who Was This Widow?

She was probably the wife of a poor man who had died. Life had failed her, in a real sense, because the **plight of widows** in the ancient world was difficult. Widows in ancient Israel had no job, no insurance, no annuity, no government support. She lived on the lowest edge of the economic scale, dependent on her family and friends, and perhaps with children yet to raise. Poverty and ruin were always at her door. On top of that, she was a woman with a broken heart, daily facing a loneliness that further sapped her strength.

What Was Her Gift?

She gave 2 copper coins, called lepta, which were the smallest coin in circulation, 1/64th of a day's wages. Not much. She dropped them into the offering boxes, and no one would have heard the sound they made.

Jesus saw her do it, and had **watched** carefully. **He saw something** that everyone else probably missed, and he called his disciples over to draw their attention to it.

"Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Mark 12:43–44

Her amount was the **smallest**. But he says it was '**more**'. More than all the wealthy people had given. Perhaps he even meant that she had given 'more' than all of them together. It was a rather remarkable thing to say about her tiny gift. **What did he mean by it?**

Well, for starters, it was '**more**' **substantial**. Others gave a **part** of what they had, or perhaps a **tithe** of what they had. You give a **portion**, and you have **a lot left**. Giving **proportionally** is how many of us do it. It's a good thing. But she gave '**everything**' she had. Her little purse was her entire bank account. It held all her savings, all her assets, all her finances. She took her purse and turned it upside down, emptying it into the offering box. She had nothing left.

And then, her giving was **'more' sacrificial**. Jesus noticed that others gave out of their **surplus**. They gave from what was **left over**, and it didn't affect their lifestyle. Do we eat any less because of the way we give? Dress any worse? Travel any less? Probably not, we don't give that much. But she did. She gave out of her supply for that very day, and it meant **she had nothing left** for what lay ahead. How she gave affected how she lived.

And so her giving was also **'more' risky**. When we give, we do it in such a way as our needs are taken care of first. Our risks are minimized, and then we give. But when she gave that day, she gave up what little **control** she had of her life. Her giving put her in a place of real risk.

Mark uses a special word when he says that she gave 'all she had to live on' – the word is **'bios'**, and it means **'life'**. Her giving was **substantial, sacrificial, and risky**. Life-giving giving. And Jesus saw it, and was stirred by it.

Why Did She Do That? None of us would have advised her to do so. *'Keep at least one of the coins'* I would have told her. Wouldn't you have said the same? So why did she do this?

Well, I suspect **she had found a new faith in God in this season of loss and loneliness**. She had come to him with a kind of desperate dependence. Perhaps she had read the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarepeth – How God had promised her that her oil would not run out and her jar of flour would never be empty – and made good on that promise. Sometimes when she prayed for her daily bread, she would not eat until the answer came.

But then she found **the answers did come**, again and again they came. If **life had failed** her, **God had not**, not the God of Israel. In the middle of the night he whispered to her. **He would be there** for her. And he was. As the weeks and months rolled on **the wound in her heart began to heal**. Through surprising ways and means, her needs were supplied. She didn't have much money, but God himself held her up. Someone had once said, **'You don't know God is all you need until**

God is all you have.' She found it true.

So I think she came to worship that day with something remarkable in her heart. Not bitterness, but **thankfulness**. Not a demand, but a question. **"What could she do for him who had done so much for her."** She would **give him what she could** – her days, her humble home, her thanks, and her two copper coins were all she had that day, so she bowed her head and dropped them into the treasury on the way into worship. And dropped her very life into that Temple treasury as well.

The Lord of the Temple was sitting next to the treasury as she came through, with his eyes upon her. **She didn't see him, but he saw her.**

This happened **within several days of Jesus' crucifixion**. The one who is **about to give his life** is **watching her give her life**, and he is moved. He can **see her** as he sits in the Temple, and he can **see ahead** to the cross. That place where he himself will become poor. Where he will empty the purse of his own life and pour it all out. He will do it for her. And he will do it for you.

So why did she do it? Because she found that God had given himself for her and rescued her in her distress. She **felt safe** in his presence, because she knew **he would do it again** for her, if he had to. And he did. Just a few days later.

I can't tell you what has happened to her 2 copper coins. But I can tell you that this poor widow has become world famous, known everywhere as one of God's great givers, because **her story** foreshadowed **his story**, **her giving** pointed towards **his giving**. And **his giving unleashes our giving**. And that is how the gospel goes out.