

November 8, 2015 – Mark 12:38-44 (OT: 1 Kings 17:8-16 Epistle: Hebrews 9:24-28)

The Giving that God Desires is Not Based On Amount But On Faith

The topic of stewardship is one that most of us would probably rather avoid. It can be a touchy subject, especially if we talk about our contributions to God's work. There can be a number of reasons for this, but the main one is probably that we are afraid that we will feel guilty or be made to feel guilty for not giving enough.

I heard a story of a pastor who once, when the offering plate was passed, stood at the end of each row and watched what each person put in. When the collection was completed, he went back to the front of the congregation and asked, "Did that make you uncomfortable?" He went on to point out that God sees what they put into the offering every week. Why should they be uncomfortable if the pastor watches, but not mind if their Lord and Savior is looking? I thought that was a good point and a good reminder.

But what does God consider when He sees our offerings? That is a question that our sermon text answers. Here we have this exact situation: Jesus is sitting opposite the collection boxes in the temple in the outer court watching the people throw in their contributions. Jesus doesn't look at the amount or even the percent that people give, but He looks at something far more important: the reason for their giving.

It can be easy to skim through this account and misunderstand the point. We read that "*many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans*" (vv. 41b-42). A "quadrans" is a small Roman coin that was worth 1/64 of a denarius. A denarius was a typical day's wage. At minimum wage, today a quadrans would amount to just a little over a dollar. The poor widow did not put in much, especially in comparison to the rich who threw in a lot more.

But Jesus called His disciples to Himself and told them, "*Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury*" (v. 43). From an accounting perspective, this widow's dollar was *not* more than what the others had given. It was considerably less. And notice that Jesus said that she put in more than *all those* who had given! Jesus isn't simply comparing her offering to the offering of one of the rich, but He is saying that she gave more than what everyone else had contributed combined! This makes it clear that Jesus is not looking at the dollar amount that we give, because the widow's mites did not add up to much.

But isn't that what our sinful nature wants to focus on? It wants us to compare what we give to what others give, so we can boast or simply feel good about how much we have given. We become like the scribes in the first part of our reading that Jesus warns us about. They "*desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts*" (vv. 38-39). They wanted recognition for their position and role in the church. When we focus on how much we give, we are really doing the same thing – we are wanting recognition.

But again, we see here that Jesus does not consider the amount we give. So what does He look at? He explains His seemingly illogical statement that the widow gave more than all the others by saying that the rich "*all put in out of their abundance,*" but the widow "*out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood*" (v. 44). So percent? Is that what God considers?

Proportional giving certainly popular today. Many churches encourage you give a percent of your income, often suggesting 10%. The Old Testament ceremonial law required a tithe – that is one tenth, or 10% – of the crops or produce of your fields to be given to the Lord (Leviticus

27:30, Deuteronomy 14:22). This may be a helpful “rule of thumb”, but tithing is not something required under the new covenant.

Jesus does not criticize the rich for giving a smaller percentage than the widow; He doesn't mention percentage here at all. And that is a good thing! If Jesus had stated that we should give certain percentage, our sinful flesh would latch on to that, give only that amount, and be satisfied. Again we would be tempted to focus on the amount we give – we would still be focusing on a number.

But Jesus does say what percentage the widow gave. If we were to infer from this passage the percentage God wants us to give, we would have to conclude that God wants us to give 100% of our income! Jesus said that she “*put in all that she had, her whole livelihood*” (v. 44).

While all that we have does come from God and ultimate does belong to God, Jesus is not here telling us to give everything we make. There is a difference between the Bible *describing* something and *prescribing* the same thing. Here Jesus describes what the woman had done, but does not tell his disciples or us that we should do the exact same thing. The fact that this widow gave her last dollar is commendable, but the Bible nowhere requires us to donate all that we have to the church so we have nothing to live on.

But Jesus does want us to draw a lesson from this widow offering. He called His disciples to Himself and pointed out this widow for a reason. A difference that Jesus points to between this poor widow and the others is that the rich gave “*out of their abundance*” (v. 44); they gave out of their excess; They gave what they could easily afford to give. The widow, on the other hand, gave “*all that she had*”; she had nothing left to live on; she had given “*her whole livelihood.*” But what lesson does that teach us?

Several months ago I was driving home from church and turned on the radio and heard a pastor talking about giving. He said that Jesus taught that if want to live life to the full we have to “love strong.” By this, the pastor meant that we have to give beyond our means and expect God to make up the difference. This sounds noble, but I don't know of anywhere that Jesus taught that. That may sound like what Jesus is saying we should do here. The widow here certainly gave beyond her means, but, as I said before, Jesus does not here tell us to do the same.

All these so-called lessons that people may draw from this account have the same problem: they all focus on what *we* do and how much *we* give. God doesn't need your money! He is not “*worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things*” (Acts 17:25). God says, “*Every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine*” (Psalm 50:10-11).

So what is God concerned about? There is a little word in our Gospel reading that you may have overlooked that tells us what God considers. Verse 41 says that “*Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury*” (v. 41). He didn't look at *how much*, but *how* they were giving. This, of course, doesn't refer to their technique of dropping the money in or what denominations of coin they used, but to what led them to give in the first place. He saw what was behind their giving; He saw what was in their heart.

To the outside observer, this widow gave almost nothing, but Jesus singles her out. While she gave almost nothing, to her it was everything. What does her offering say about what was in her heart? It shows that she had great faith and trust in God to provide for her. It shows her great love for God because of what He done for her. Why else would she give all that she had, even though it was so little, except to express her thanks to God? Jesus commends her for *how* she gave.

God wants us to give freely and willingly out of faith. He wants us to give from a thankful heart for what God the Father has done for us in sending His Son Jesus to take away our sins by dying on the cross.

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to finish gathering the offering for the believers in Jerusalem who were facing hardship and persecution. With all this encouragement, Paul told them: “*Let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver*” (2 Corinthians 9:7). God doesn’t want us to bring our gifts because we *have* to, but because we *want* to. The desire to bring an offering to God come from faith and trust in what God has already done for us.

One of the ways that Paul encouraged the Corinthians to give was with the example of the churches in Macedonia. They had given generously despite their own affliction and poverty; in fact, he says that they gave even beyond their ability (2 Corinthians 8:1-3). That sounds like the widow in our reading. Paul explained why the Macedonians did this. He wrote: “*And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God*” (2 Corinthians 8:5). The Lord was their focus. They didn’t give for the recognition. They didn’t give in order to get a blessing from God. They gave because God had already blessed them with salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

So often on the TV or radio, you hear: “Do this, and God will bless you!” That is backwards! God has already blessed you with every spiritual blessing through Jesus Christ before you have done anything (Ephesians 1:3). He has blessed us with eternal life, even though we don’t deserve it because of our sins. It is because God has saved us from our sin that we bring our offerings to Him to express our thanks for what He has done.

It is your faith in Jesus, not the amount, that makes your offering acceptable in His sight. We see this in the first two offerings ever recorded in the Bible: Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground and Abel brought an offer of the first born of his flock (Genesis 4:3-5). God accepted Abel’s offering but He rejected Cain’s. The difference was not in what they offered, but *how* they offered them. Hebrews 11:4 tells us, “*By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.*” It was Abel’s faith in God that made both him and his offering acceptable before God. And it is the same for you. Your faith and trust in Jesus’ death and resurrection makes you and your offering pleasing to God.

When you give to God, focus on what He has first given you: the forgiveness of all your sins and eternal life through Jesus Christ. Through His perfect life, innocent death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead, Jesus has earned God’s favor for you. Give cheerfully to God, not grudgingly or out of necessity, but from faith in the salvation you have received as a gift through Christ, for this is how you make an offering that God desires and in which He delights.

Rock of Ages Evangelical Lutheran Church

www.GrandRapidsLutheran.org

Pastor Peter T. Evensen

616-322-9167 (cell) – peterevensen@icloud.com