

The Widow's Mite

Luke 20:45-21:4

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for March 10, 2024

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One of the greatest examples of true and genuine giving comes from a very unlikely source. Jesus reminded His disciples—and reminds us today—of two very important truths: that our care for widows reflects our love for God, and that our attitude toward giving matters more than the amount of our giving.

When Luke was writing his inspired Gospel account in the first century, there was no more difficult, if not dangerous, life to endure than that of a widow.

In her first century world at the time, she and her children would be allowed to live in her deceased husband's home unless she was unable to meet the expenses of the household.

Edwin M. Yamauchi & Marvin R. Wilson, *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical & Post-Biblical Antiquity* (Hendrickson, 2017), p. 1753

If she couldn't make ends meet, she was virtually destitute, unless some family member or friends took her in.

Her children—if she had some—were equally at risk of deprivation and homelessness.

In the Roman world, the word *orphanos*, which gives us the word “orphan”—actually referred to children whose father had died, even if their mother was still living.

Ibid, 1742

A few centuries later, the word would be used for children without any parents.

For a widow, living in first century Rome, everything changed in her status. Even a change in her apparel was mandated. She was to wear a head covering in public that was folded half-way back on her head to designate her widowhood.

Part of that was to publicly identify her as a widow. And that's because Ceasar Augustus demanded that a Roman widow remarry within a year's time, so as not to become a burden on Roman society. A widow would be fined if they refused to marry again. Later

Ceasars in the Roman empire extended that time-period from one year to two years, until eventually this policy was permanently discarded.

Ibid, p. 1756

The Jewish world was different. There was no legal penalty for being a widow. In fact, the law of Moses required a special tithe: every third year an additional tenth of all the produce of grain and fruit was to be donated to the needy in their villages and towns, including widows and orphans.

The law decreed that this tithe would be distributed over the next three years, so that, as Moses says in **Deuteronomy 26:12 ...**

“So that they may eat within your towns and be filled.”

Deuteronomy 26:12b

Now unfortunately, by the time of Jesus, there was a lack of sympathy and care for widows, even in the Jewish community.

The early church will emerge as the leading caregiver for widows. **Half of chapter 5 of 1 Timothy** will provide guidelines for caring for widows. Paul will write to pastor Timothy, **“Honor widows who are truly widows.”**

In other words, those who have no adult sons to care for them or family to take them in.

Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:5 ...

She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplication and prayers ... let [that] widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age.

1 Timothy 5:5a & 9a

In other words, if she's committed to God, without a family to help, and at least 60 years old—which would suggest she won't marry again—she's to be put on this church roll.

The implication of this was that there was not only a record, of sorts, for church membership, but that these widows would receive some sort of financial or physical assistance.

We get a glimpse of the church's concern for believing widows back in Acts chapter 6, where you have one of the first official ministries of the church launched: caring for the needs of widows.

I found it interesting in my study that when Aristides defended his fellow Christians before the emperor Hadrian, some 25 years after Paul wrote to Timothy, Aristides was proving to the emperor the value of the Christian community in Rome and he said this to the emperor, “Christians love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem.”

Ibid, p. 1757

In other words, to care for widows was distinctively Christian. And it was counter cultural. Frankly, the 1st century looks a lot like the 21st century: everybody's looking out for number one. We are by nature self-centered, self-absorbed, and apathetic.

So, this became a Christian distinctive. One letter written by a church leader in the 2nd century wrote that “anyone who does not treat widows justly is walking in the way of darkness.”

Ibid

How you treat a widow proves the authenticity of your faith.

Now again, by the time of Christ's ministry, the religious leadership in Israel was just as calloused as the Roman culture around them.

And Jesus just exposes it all; He just calls it out, right out in public.

He delivers some of His strongest denunciations ever and it's against members of the Sanhedrin—the high court of Israel—and in particular against the party of the scribes who sat on the Sanhedrin; they were the legal experts, the attorneys at law regarding the law of Moses.

In other words, these men knew **Deuteronomy 24** by heart.

We're now at the end of Luke chapter 20, so let's listen in as Jesus exposes them in public. First, He describes their haughty character in **verse 45**:

And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts.”

Luke 20:45-46

Now let's break this down.

They wore **long, or flowing, robes**. The stole (στολη), which gives us our word “stole,” was a hand-tailored white silk robe embroidered with all sorts of colorful religious symbols.

These robes were traditionally reserved for religious festivals, but the scribes had begun wearing them every day to gain maximum attention.

Adapted from Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible Commentary: Luke* (Tyndale House, 1997), p. 467

And that's because they loved, Jesus says here, ***these greetings in the marketplaces.***

They also loved, Jesus says here, the ***best seats in the synagogues.*** Just like you do—it's that back row, back there where I can't see you!

Well, in the synagogue, the best seats were not in the back, they were in the front. But they were turned to face the audience, typically located behind the speaker.

These seats were closest to the scrolls that would be read during the services, as if to imply that these men were closest to God.

Finally, Jesus describes them as loving the ***place of honor at the feasts***—this meant they were seated closest to the host family; they were the VIPs of the ancient world.

Being a scribe had gone straight to their head.

One author writing on this text gives this warning: “You cannot encourage the impression that you are great, and at the same time exalt a great God.”

R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume Two* (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 285

You can't have both.

Jesus just exposes their haughty character. And He's not finished; He now exposes their heartless corruption in ***verse 47:***

“... who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Luke 20:47

In other words, they're in deep trouble with God!

It's bad enough to rip people off, but to be a scam artist in the name of God is even more vile, and to rip off a widow is about as low as you can go. Jesus says they will face a ***greater condemnation.***

Now we know from history that people would often place their finances in the hands of the scribes; the scribes were legal experts; people would completely trust them to manage their affairs.

A widow especially trusted a scribe with the money she would have received from her father's dowry, at the death of her husband. It was all she would have had left.

Barton, p. 467

Scribes were not to charge widows for legal counsel, so instead they developed the practice keeping some of the dowry for themselves; they also accepted money from widows in exchange for special prayers on their behalf.

Hughes, p. 286

Jesus is clearly referring to that when He says that they are ***pretending to make long prayers*** for these widows but are instead devouring or consuming their money.

They weren't praying for them; they were preying on them.

Nobody would promise to pray, for money, would they? Religious scam artists are everywhere, promising people everything if they just send in their money—even the promise to pray.

I remember one televangelist who was exposed by hidden cameras. He had made a special plea for money, and he promised that he would pray for the requests that people sent in along with their money. The hidden cameras showed his staff out by the dumpsters, opening the envelopes, taking out the money, and throwing the prayer requests away.

Scribes are alive and well!

When I interviewed a woman in our new members class some time ago, she said she was moving her membership from another church in town—a small church where everybody knew everybody.

I asked her why she was leaving; she was a widow and she told me that something had happened, and she wanted to talk to her pastor about it. She called the office and told the secretary that she needed some counsel and prayer. She was put on hold, and the secretary came back a few minutes later and told this widow, "The pastor looked up your financial pledge and you are behind. If you catch up, he'll be glad to talk to you."

He's a religious scammer selling his services for money.

Now after describing the character and the corruption of the scribes, ***Mark's Gospel*** account tells us that Jesus got up and went over and sat down by the treasury.

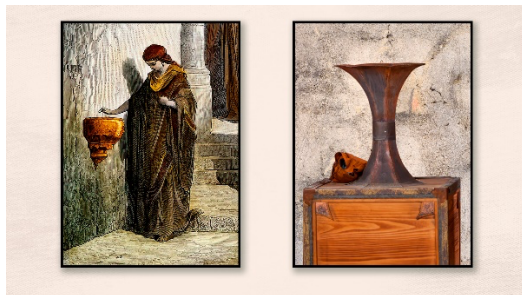
Luke picks it up at that point here in chapter 21 and verse 1:

Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.

Luke 21:1-2

Both Mark and Luke place these two events side by side. Jesus's scathing rebuke of the scribes who rob widows, and now with this poor widow showing up to give her gift.

Now this event is taking place in the treasury—the Court of Women—where 13 bronze or brass trumpet shaped receptacles were attached to the walls in the temple.



Portable collection boxes also came with brass trumpet shaped receptacles.

In the temple, the 13 receptacles, attached to the wall were inscribed with designations for what these offerings were for.

They might be marked, “Young birds,” which were used for sacrifices; another would be marked, “Frankincense,” another designated, “Temple Dues.”

Hughes, p. 290

But six of these receptacles were marked “Freewill Offerings.”

These gifts were not required; they were to be given out of a heart of love and appreciation to God.

But this became the place where you could get the most attention. You just love God so much you want to give—and the more money you could clang down the opening of this brass trumpet, the more people might swivel around to find out who you were!

And by the time of Jesus, this had become quite a staged production. Jesus even used the word for this kind of giving from which we get our word “theater.” They were putting on a show –

Here's what was happening:

Someone could drop in an *aureus*—a gold coin equal to a month's salary in these days. But why drop in one of those when you can exchange it for 25 *denarii*—equaling the same amount but making 25 times more noise.

In today's economy, think of it this way: you could slide a \$100 bill down the trumpet, and nobody would notice. So that's no fun, but convert it to 400 quarters and that'll make some noise! And it's going to take a little while too, you will hold up the line. "Whoa, who is *that* guy?"

This is no doubt what Jesus had in mind, in **Matthew 6**, when Jesus said, "*When you give, don't sound the trumpet, like the hypocrites, who want to be seen by others.*"

Don't sound the trumpet. "Don't toot your own horn" we would say today.

You don't have to make a lot of noise in order to be seen by God.

And that's part of what Jesus is about to reveal here, because someone has just shown up who doesn't make any noise at all: **a widow** quietly arrives, Luke records, and slides in **two small copper coins**.

These coins were called "lepta" which means "shavings" or "peeling"; they were the tiniest, thinnest coin available. Translated into Old English it was called a mite—this was the widow's mite.

Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. editor, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 8* (Regency, 1984), p. 741

By today's standards, this is about 10 percent of one cent.

These two tiny coins, the size of shirt buttons, wouldn't have even rattled as they slid down the trumpet and landed in the treasury box.

But listen, she's not giving to make noise—she's giving out of love for God.

Now keep in mind that Jesus doesn't condemn the rich for giving large amounts here, many of them might have been purely motivated to give, and their gifts were certainly significant.

Some have suggested that Jesus is illustrating here that a widow is about to be robbed of everything she owns. Just like those scribes who defrauded the widows of their savings, well, here they go again, this corrupt temple system is ripping off some poor, naïve widow of all she has and she doesn't know any better.

That isn't what's happening at all. Jesus does not say to His disciples, "Look at that poor gullible widow who's being cheated out of her last penny."

What He's about to do is make her a model of sacrificial giving. He's going to introduce some principles for what we could call, "New Divine Math."

John Calvin, the reformer, wrote in his commentary on this text that Jesus is both commending those who can't give much, and challenging those who have much left over.

Adapted from Hughes, p. 292

Notice what Jesus says now in verse 3:

And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

Luke 21:3-4

Jesus uses a quantitative adjective here—she has given *more*. More?

The disciples are probably scratching their heads over this new math like I scratched my head over old math! I didn't get that either.

Jesus is using a different calculator than the one we use. He's delivering an entirely different way of thinking than we do.

Let me put it in the form of principles. **First:**

Whatever you give, what's left over is what matters most.

In other words, we can be impressed by what we give, Jesus is impressed by what we keep.

So, if that's true, your bank register becomes a perceptive revelation of your heart for God.

In this new math, it isn't the size of the gift, but the sacrifice of the giver that brought Jesus off his seat there in the temple.

And what made this widow a remarkable illustration for Jesus to commend had nothing to do with how much she gave, but how little she had left over.

Principle #2:

Whenever you give, Jesus is interested in what it reveals.

Now this isn't a threat that God is watching you! It's just an observation that's almost too obvious to mention.

Jesus does see. He does know. And He does care.

Did it occur to you that Jesus knew how much she had to her name. He knew the balance in her bank account, so to speak.

Again, there's no indication at all that she's being robbed by the religious system.

The truth is, she was giving a freewill offering, and we know that because the amount was too small to buy a bird, or some frankincense, or to pay her temple tax.

Jesus isn't pointing her out as someone who deserves to be *pitied*; He's pointing her out because she deserves to be *imitated*.

- *Whatever* you give, what's left over is what matters most.
- *Whenever* you give, Jesus is interested in what it reveals.

Now third:

***Wherever* you give, your heart must be motivated by love for Christ.**

Whatever, whenever and wherever, motives matter.

The apostle Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 9:7**, "Don't give grudgingly—reluctantly. If you want to please God then give cheerfully, with the right attitude and motive."

In a few weeks, when you write that check to the IRS, you make it out to the Treasury Department of the United States; they don't care about your attitude. They don't care if you give grudgingly, or angrily or cheerfully. Just send in the check. They don't care. But not with the Lord.

Ibid, p. 292

Paul writes, **God loves a cheerful giver**. A cheerful giver is simply someone who's heart agrees with their hand. We are not giving because we *have* to but because we *get* to.

And to give 1/10th of a penny to God, with the heart of this widow, is to hear Jesus effectively say, "That's the way to give to Me."

Whenever you give, whatever you give, wherever you give, you are making a statement of faith in God's provision.

It's remarkable to me that she gave both coins here, and not just one.

There's not a financial planner on the planet who would encourage her to do what she just did.

As Jesus was sitting here in the temple court, He watched people make a contribution; but He watched this widow make a consecration of her life.

She not only gave her finances, she is giving her future, into the hands of God.

A woman by the name of Frances Havergal came to a crossroads in her life. She had been a believer for decades but knew there were places in her heart and life she didn't want God to control.

She writes that one day, she was convicted that she must give every corner of her life to the Lord. She wrote, "I realized there must be full surrender before there could be full satisfaction."

Robert J. Morgan, [Then Sings My Soul](#) (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), p. 191

She then wrote a hymn in 1874 she called "her hymn of consecration." The church has been singing it now for many years. Some of the lyrics were inspired by the text we've just studied and the example of this widow.

I've edited down some of her stanzas; they go like this:

*Take my life and let it be,
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

*Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold.
Take my heart, it is Thine own,
It shall be Thy royal throne.*

*Take myself and I will be,
ever, only, all for Thee.*

Sounds like a widow we will one day meet in heaven. Not because she gave her last two coins, but because she had come to worship God, whom she knew—in spite of her loss, in spite of her poverty, in spite of her difficulty—could be trusted with everything, including her future.

She was singing along:

*Take myself and I will be,
ever, only, all for Thee.*

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Study Guide

Summary:

In the heart of the synagogue, the most esteemed seats faced the congregation, symbolizing proximity to God and His Word. These seats, and the honor they represented, had become a source of pride for the scribes, whose roles as interpreters of the Law had elevated their societal status. This external display of piety, however, masked a grievous corruption: the exploitation of the vulnerable, particularly widows, whom they defrauded under the guise of legal and spiritual counsel.

Jesus, in His divine wisdom, exposed this duplicity with piercing clarity. He revealed that the scribes' long prayers were but a pretense to mask their greed. Their actions were not only a betrayal of trust but a desecration of their sacred duty. The gravity of their sin was such that Jesus pronounced upon them a greater condemnation.

The widow's plight in the first-century world was one of vulnerability and dependence. Bereft of a husband, she faced the risk of destitution and societal neglect. The Mosaic Law, however, provided for her needs through a compassionate system of support. This divine provision was a testament to God's care for the marginalized, a care that the early church would emulate and expand upon, as evidenced by the guidelines for widow care in 1 Timothy and the practical ministry of the early church recorded in Acts.

Against this backdrop of exploitation and divine provision, Jesus observed the giving at the temple treasury. The rich made their contributions, their wealth clanging loudly into the receptacles, a public display of their generosity. Yet, it was the silent offering of a poor widow that captured Jesus' attention. Her two small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny, were given out of her poverty, representing not just her livelihood but her very life.

Jesus used this moment to teach His disciples a new divine math, where the value of a gift is not measured by its size but by the sacrifice it represents. The widow's offering was greater than all the others because she gave all she had. Her gift was a profound act of faith, entrusting her future to God's provision.

This widow's act of worship was not a display of naivety but a model of sacrificial giving. She was not being robbed by the religious system; she was freely offering her all to God. Her example challenges us to examine our motives in giving, to ensure that our hearts are aligned with our actions, and to give cheerfully, as an expression of our love for Christ.

The widow's offering teaches us that true giving is a consecration of our lives to God, trusting Him with our future. Her example echoes through the ages, inspiring us to live lives of genuine faith and surrender.

Discussion Guide:

Bible Reading: Luke 20:45-47; Luke 21:1-4; 1 Timothy 5:5-9

Observation Questions:

- What did Jesus observe about the behavior and appearance of the scribes in the synagogue?
- How did Jesus contrast the giving of the rich with the offering of the poor widow?
- What does the passage in 1 Timothy tell us about the early church's view and care for widows?

Interpretation Questions:

- Why do you think Jesus highlighted the scribes' desire for recognition and their exploitation of widows?
- In what way does the widow's offering reflect a different kind of giving compared to the rich? What might Jesus be teaching us through this contrast?
- Considering the guidelines for widow care in 1 Timothy, how did the early church understand and practice the care for the vulnerable?

Application Questions:

- Reflect on your own giving; is there an area in your life where you can practice sacrificial giving, trusting God with the outcome?
- Can you identify someone in your community who is vulnerable like the widows in the Bible? What is one practical step you can take this week to support them?
- How does your attitude in giving reflect your heart for God? Think of a specific instance where you can give cheerfully, without seeking recognition.
- What does "full surrender" to God look like in your life? Name one aspect of your life you feel called to consecrate to God this week.
- How can you ensure that your acts of worship, including giving, are done with pure motives, as an expression of love for Christ?