

“A Widow’s Might”

One day Jesus went into the temple, and He sat down opposite the place where people gave their offerings. There was a spot in the Court of Women where there were 13 collection boxes. They were called “The Trumpets”, because they looked like trumpets: a narrow part at the top and wide part at the bottom. Each of these was for a special purpose. One might be to buy wood used in the sacrifices, another to pay for incense burned on the altar, one for the upkeep of the golden vessels in the temple. In other words, offerings were collected for the daily expenses of operating the temple.

Jesus sat there for a while and watched how people gave. Wealthy people came by and put in sizeable amounts of money. Then a poor widow came and put in 2 coins. The Greek word for the coin is “lepton”, which literally means “the thin one”. It was the smallest coin in circulation among the Jews (similar to a penny today).

Then Mark writes this: “Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have 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). Jesus used this as a teachable moment for His disciples. What was the lesson He wanted to convey? *She gave more than the wealthy people who gave. Why? Because they gave out of their abundance, and in her poverty she gave all she had!* Unlike the wealthy donors, her giving represented *a real sacrifice*.

Did you notice that Jesus watched what people gave! It was important to Him! Jesus talked about money, and our attitude towards money, about how we relate to material things, and about giving to God,

But a lot of people don’t want preachers, or church leaders, to talk about money! One of the common criticisms people level at the church is this: “The church is always asking for money.” Before Bill Hybels launched Willow Creek church in the Chicago suburbs he surveyed the community, and asked people why they didn’t come to church. This was one of the most frequently heard responses: “The church is always asking for money.” Have you ever heard that? Have you ever *said that*? Do you think this church is always asking for money? Do you think I’m always asking for money?

And yet, it’s not only people *outside the church* who don’t like us to talk about money and giving in the church - sometimes it’s those *in the church*! Over most of my years of ministry I’ve taken one sermon a year – usually in November – to preach on giving. And yet that has gotten me into some trouble! In a little country church I served early on there was this couple who stopped coming to church. Out of concern, they were visited by another church member, to see why they had quit coming. They said they stopped coming because I talked too much about money. They said they’d come back, but if I preached about money at any point they would get up and leave. Well, wouldn’t you know the next Sunday was that Sunday of the year when I preached on giving. They were there. Guess who got up and walked out – and they never returned as long as I was there. A lady in one church, who even helped out in the church office, left that church and went to a neighboring church because I preached on giving.

I just learned not too long ago that a very active member in one of the churches I served got angry when I preached about money and giving. She said she would never set foot in that church again. And from what I've been told, she hasn't. (I never knew this until recently, and we left that church over 16 years ago).

But here I am...still at it. Taking one Sunday a year to talk about our stewardship and how we manage the money God has entrusted to us. I'm not worried about being accused on Judgment Day for preaching too much about giving and our relationship to material things. I'm more worried that perhaps I didn't say enough! Why? Because the Bible, and Jesus, addressed this issue. And how we manage the money and material blessings God gives us has eternal consequences. It affects our soul, and our relationship with God.

Scripture as a whole instructs us on how to give and what to give. God hasn't left us in the dark on this subject! *The standard for giving, the beginning point, is the tithe (10% of our income).* Leviticus 27:30 says, "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord." The Israelites lived in an agricultural economy. They would give the first tenth of their crops or produce back to the Lord – that was a way of thanking God for His provisions, and acknowledging that *all the rest* belonged to God also. At one point, when the Israelites held back the tithe, the prophet Malachi said they were robbing God! "Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings!" (Malachi 3:8)."

But the Hebrew people also had *other offerings* beyond just the tithe (the tenth). In the New Testament, not much is said about tithing. It's like it's just assumed that if the Israelites tithed *under law*, followers of Jesus would do that under grace!

The Bible also says *we are to give regularly*: "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income" (1 Corinthians 16:2). Regular, systematic giving is important as a spiritual discipline.

We are to give in proportion to our income. "All must give as they are able, according to the blessings given to them by the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 16:17). We don't all have equal income or financial resources, so we can't all give the same amount.

We are to give *willingly and cheerfully*! 2 Corinthians 9:7 tells us that! "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Don't be grouchy and grumpy about giving.

In our Scripture text for today about the widow, Jesus took giving to a new level. If we are His followers, when we give, it should represent a sacrifice! So, here's the big question: How much of what I give back to God – what we give to the church, or to charities and causes that bless people and serve people's needs – how much of that represents a real sacrifice for us? What am I doing without, in order to give to the Lord's work?

Every once in a while someone comes along as a shining example of one who gives sacrificially. One of my Christian heroes was Harry Denman. Harry was a lay person who headed up the Board of Evangelism of our denomination. I heard him speaking at Landisville Campmeeting. He was a simple, down-to-earth disciple of Jesus. In one sermon he told about how he only owns 1 shirt. He washes it out each night. He said he didn't own a watch – that would give him a reason to talk to people. He'd ask them the time, then engage them in conversation about Jesus.

Two affluent Christian men, an attorney and a businessman, joined a tour group traveling around the world. Their pastor asked them to take pictures of anything they saw that was unusual. In Korea they saw a boy in a field pulling a crude plow, while an old man held the plow handles in his hands. The lawyer was amused and took some pictures. He commented to the tour guide, "That's an unusual sight, they must be very poor." The guide said, yes, they were. That's the family of Chi Noui. When a church was being built in their area they were excited to give something to help it along. But they had no money, so they sold their only ox and gave the money to the church. This spring, they were taking turns pulling the plow themselves.

The lawyer became thoughtful: "That must have been a real sacrifice." The guide responded, "They didn't call it that. They thought they were fortunate that they had an ox to sell." The lawyer was especially quiet the rest of the trip. When he got home he took the photos to his pastor. As he sat down in the pastor's study, he said in a heartfelt way, "I want to double my giving to the church. And please, give me some plow work to do. I've never known what sacrifice for the Lord and the church meant. A Korean Christian taught me. I'm ashamed to say I've never yet given anything to my church that cost me anything."

What have you and I sacrificed in order to give back to God? When we go home today, look in our closets. The number of coats, the number of outfits, the number of shirts or tops. The number of shoes. How much of this could we easily do without? All the other "stuff" that we've managed to accumulate. How much of this do we absolutely need? (I don't say this to irritate us. Just to be honest).

Remember these words of Jesus: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

In 1815 Napoleon was defeated in the Battle of Waterloo, and the hero of the battle was the Duke of Wellington. The Duke's most recent biographer claims to have an advantage over all his previous biographers. He says that he found an old account ledger that showed how the Duke had spent his money. He claims this provided a far better clue to what the Duke thought was really important than anything he might have said in his letters and speeches. I think there's a lot of truth in that. Many people don't much write checks anymore, but our check book, our bank statement, says a whole lot about whether the treasures we value are material things, or whether our treasures are in heaven.

C. S. Lewis once said, “Christian charity is not Christian nor charity unless our giving cramps our style and causes us to sacrifice some needs as well as luxuries. And that sort of giving is just the starting point of the Christian journey, not its end.”

I realize this message is a hard one to hear (hard to preach too), but hopefully you’re not among those who leave the service angry (at least you didn’t walk out on me!). But let me close with some very encouraging words!

God has given some wonderful promises to those of us who give generously and sacrificially! Jesus Himself once promised this: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38). In 2 Corinthians 9:6, 8 the Apostle Paul is writing to Christians in Corinth about giving generously, and he says this: “Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously...and God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” In other words, *we can never outgive God!* God wants to make sure that those who give generously will be given enough to continue giving!

Can you and I trust God to provide our needs if we tithe, or give sacrificially? Shortly after Dallas Theological Seminary was founded in 1924, it almost came to the point of bankruptcy. All their creditors were going to foreclose on a particular day. That morning representatives of the seminary met in the President’s office to pray that God would provide. A man by the name of Harry Ironside was there, and when it was his turn to pray, he prayed: “Lord, we know that the cattle on a thousand hills are Thine. Please sell some of them and send us the money.” While they were praying a tall Texan stepped up to the business office and said, “I just sold two carloads of cattle in Ft. Worth. I’ve been trying to make a business deal but it fell through, and I feel compelled to give the money to the seminary. I don’t know if you need it or not, but here’s the check.” The secretary took the check, and knowing how critical things were financially, went to the door of the prayer meeting and timidly tapped. When she finally got a response, the President took the check out of her hand. It was exactly the amount of the debt! When he looked at the name, he recognized the cattleman, and turning to Dr. Ironside said, “Harry, God sold the cattle!” *See, we can’t outgive God!*

I’d like to leave us all with a challenge: a challenge to tithe (give at least 10% of your income to God’s work – that includes giving to the church, as well as other ministries and charitable causes. Try tithing for 2 months, and if God hasn’t provided your needs, quit! I’d also like to challenge us each to give up something so we can give something extra to the Lord.

I’ve titled this sermon, “A Widow’s Might” – M I G H T! Sometimes this story about the widow giving her 2 small coins is called “the widow’s mite – M I T E. But I believe, whether we’re a widow or not, if we give like her, there’s power and MIGHT in that kind of sacrificial giving!

