

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Giving Your Life Away

Mark 12:35-44

Today, we come to the final sermon in our October series on the theme of generosity, especially as it relates to our stewardship of money and possessions. So far, we've seen that generosity is an act of worship, a way of acknowledging God's sovereignty and demonstrating our heartfelt devotion to him. Secondly, we've seen that generosity is an expression of faith, a way of living in dependence on God, who loves us, sustains us, and provides for our needs. Thirdly, we've seen that generosity is a channel for the flow of God's grace into the lives of others. Through our financial gifts, we participate in God's giving to the world, which is manifest most of all in Jesus Christ. Fourthly, we've seen that we can grow in generosity through the practice of regular, disciplined, percentage giving, particularly in the form of tithing. Tithing is a traditional guideline, a time-tested standard that has been observed by many devoted Christians for centuries, and by millions of believers today.

This morning, we bring our generosity emphasis to a conclusion by coming back to the house of worship, where we encounter someone who puts all of our giving in perspective. Her gift makes tithing look like a minor inconvenience, a drop in the bucket. Don't get me wrong, she definitely believes in percentage giving. But not 10 percent, 20 percent, or 30 percent. In her case, 100 percent. According to Jesus, "She, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on" (v. 44).

It won't be long until we hear the Salvation Army bells ringing. A couple of years ago, one person made a unique contribution in one of the red kettles at Boston's North Station. As one commander put it, "In addition to money, I've seen watch batteries, paper clips, safety pins, all sorts of strange things, but this one takes the cake." A widow had donated her diamond engagement ring and wedding band, in memory of her late husband. The diamond ring was valued at \$1,850.

The rings were donated along with a note that read: "I've dropped my wedding ring in your Red Kettle knowing that the money from its sale will buy toys for needy children." The widow went on to say: "In all seasons, my husband was a giver. I especially remember his joy in giving at Christmastime, especially to those in need. To honor his memory, I donate this ring." The rings sold a few days later for an astonishing \$21,000, eleven times their appraised value. As for her motivation, the anonymous widow did provide some clue when she wrote at the bottom of her note: "To find out what a man is worth, take away his money and his possessions."¹

When it comes to possessions, the widow in today's text has next to nothing. She has two coins, the smallest in circulation. Combined, they're worth less than a penny. This isn't the kind of offering that most people will notice. But then again, she isn't the kind of person that most people notice. She's one of society's invisible people. No one ever pays much attention to her, especially now that her husband is dead. He was the source of her name, her livelihood, and her place in the community. But now, there are no other family

members to help provide for her. She has no social safety net. The best she can hope for might be a place in the permanent underclass, where she can survive, day by day, as just another anonymous face in the crowd of the oppressed.

But Jesus has spotted her. "Calling his disciples to him," which is Mark's way of saying, "Hey church, gather around." There's someone you need to see. And the best way to see her is not only to look at her, but at the others around her. Now I know that the offering is usually a more subdued, anonymous part of the service where you try not to stare at what your fellow worshipers are putting in the plate. But the truth is, you can tell a lot about a person by the kind of offering they make. On the one hand, there are folks who have large bank accounts and get plenty of notoriety. They scrupulously calculate their tithe and show up for worship, dressed to impress. In fact, don't be surprised that some of your own religious authorities, especially the scribes, like to socialize with them and be seen with them. You know how your high ranking clergy enjoy public recognition and places of honor on social occasions.

On the other hand, there are folks who never get invited to such social occasions. They don't have the money, or the influence, to gain a seat at the table. Some days, they don't even have food to put on their own table. One of them is right over there, standing in line, getting ready to drop her two little coins into the church's treasury. She's the one you need to keep your eyes on.

In one respect, Jesus wants us to see the scale and scope of the widow's gift. But he also wants us to see and reflect on the economic practices and institutions that have created such disparity between the haves and the have nots. How is it that when the plate is passed, some pull out wads of cash, while all the widow has to pull out is a pair of coins? Earlier in our text, Jesus condemns the religious leaders who perpetuate and participate in practices that leave so many, especially the widows, destitute. "They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers," says our Lord. According to the Law of Moses, the spiritual leaders were supposed to be seeking justice and watching out for the poor, the orphans, and the widows. Instead, they've been foreclosing on the property of widows, and consuming what little they have left. And now, one of those widows shows up dutifully at God's house, ready to give her last cent to a corrupt institution that has done more to hurt her than to help her.

One time, during some visitation at a nursing home, I was at the bedside of a woman, covering many of our usual topics. How our families are doing. What's been in the news. How things are going at the church. And so on. Suddenly, in the midst of our conversation, she interrupted, "Oh, while you're here, I want to make sure I don't forget. I need to pay him." "Pay him? Who is him?" I thought to myself. Turns out that "Pay him" meant give some money to God and have me deliver the offering to the church. It was an awkward moment. I didn't outright resist her contribution, but I did try to downplay the need for her to feel like she should have to give to our ministry, especially under her current circumstances.

What made the situation even more awkward was the fact that a gentleman was sitting at the bedside of her roommate, spending some time with his loved one. I never turned around to see, but I assume he overheard our conversation, and witnessed her reaching into a white envelope containing a small amount of cash, handing me a portion of it to bring back for our collection. I thought to myself, "You know, to an outsider, this may not look good. Maybe he thinks I'm just a greedy preacher, a modern day scribe who spends a few minutes with a widow of modest means enduring multiple health problems, then walks away with a portion of her livelihood to add to the church's treasury!"

Or maybe I was just worrying about nothing. Maybe he didn't even notice any of it. Or if he did, maybe he took note of her eagerness to give rather than my reluctance to receive. Perhaps he saw someone who, in the midst of her own hardships and suffering, was prepared to be generous and sacrificial. Many times the most exemplary gifts come from folks with the most modest means, under the most trying circumstances. Jesus says, "They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on." As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says of today's text, Jesus "simply points out that the major characters are minor givers, while the minor character—the poor widow—turns out to be the major donor of them all."²

As you and I sit with Jesus and observe the morning offering, he wants us to zoom out and see many things. He wants us to see the unrighteous contrasts that characterize life in this present world. He wants us to see the unjust disparity between abundance and poverty, between those who have too much and those who have too little. He wants us to see not only the poor widow but also the social conditions and practices that have created her poverty. He wants us to see how those called to serve God in the world, and the religious institutions they represent, can get caught up in greed and wealth and ostentation, and end up contradicting the will and purpose of God.

But in addition to zooming out, Jesus also wants us to zoom in and see the widow herself. And in seeing the widow herself, to see Jesus himself. Remember that in Mark's narrative, the story of the widow's offering helps bring Jesus' public ministry to a close. In just a few days, Jesus will be crucified. His own end is near. So perhaps what he sees in the widow's offering is an anticipation of the offering he is about to make of himself for our salvation. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

If you ask me, that is why he noticed the poor widow in the first place. She reminded him of someone. It was the end for her; it was the end for him, too. She gave her living to a corrupt church; he was about to give his life for a corrupt world. She withheld nothing from God; neither did he. It took one to know one. When he looked at her it was like looking in a mirror at a reflection so clear that he called his disciples over to see. "Look," he said to those who meant to follow him. "That is what I have been talking about. Look at her."³

As followers of Jesus, we need to keep looking at the poor widow. Some of you may have seen her many times. For others, today may be the first time you've met her. In either case, don't let her out of your sight. And don't let the other people in the temple crowd, and their supposedly generous offerings, distract you. Don't get caught up in their impressive looks, their social connections, or their material success. If you do, you'll miss one of the best stewardship sermons ever preached. I've been standing up here preaching about generosity for five Sundays. But the poor widow, in the span of just five verses, delivers one of history's greatest messages on money, without even using words.

Her sacrificial offering foreshadows the gift of Christ himself who, "though he was rich, yet for (our) sake became poor, so that by his poverty (we) might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). One way or another, the journey into greater giving, and growing generosity, leads back to the cross. That's where we see Christ's own self-offering for the world. And his own offering takes shape in all the ways that we, as his disciples, give our own lives away: our hearts, our time, our strength, our talents, our money. Our wholes selves, your whole self, given generously and completely to Christ.

¹ Kiera Blessing, "Widow Drops Wedding Rings, Note in Salvation Army Kettle," *Boston Globe* (December 8, 2014).

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "The One to Watch." In *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1993) 130.

³ Taylor, "The One to Watch," 130-31.