



## The Widow and her Mite

There was an occasion in the final week of the life of our Lord when He went to the temple and walked to a spot in the Court of the Women where people could sit down and watch one of the temple's popular spectacles. In that court was situated the "treasury," which consisted of a line of thirteen chests shaped like trumpets into which men and women deposited their offerings. In the Jewish document called the Mishna the different designations of these chests are listed; apparently one was for purchasing turtle doves, one was for purchasing pigeons, another was for wood for burning on the altar, and so on, but there were six that were labeled "free-will offerings."

The Lord Jesus was in Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover when the population of the city would be swollen by many pilgrims who had arrived for the feast. Normally 50,000 people lived in Jerusalem, but during these days there would be an additional 200,000 pilgrims. Some of them were both devout and generous. There would be men like the Ethiopian eunuch who had a responsible and high-paying job as his country's Court Treasurer under Queen Candace. How far he had traveled! This was his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to give to Jehovah, the Lord he worshipped. The crowds of people sat overlooking these trumpet-shaped receptacles and they took special interest in the approach of a wealthy man with his servants. There was no paper currency in those days; everything was in coin. So a generous gift to the temple, a bag of money poured out, would rattle into the containers much to the delight of the spectators. Mark tells us Jesus watched many rich men who were actually throwing in large amounts. The crowd might have ooh'd and aah'd as what to them were the vast sums of money being poured into the treasury. But Christ said nothing at all at the sight and sound of the rich people's gifts. He watched everything. He knew their motives; He knew what was in man. He is watching us today and every day; when we are most unconscious of God's presence, He, whose eye is on the sparrow, is watching us, too.

Then a little widow stood in line, her clothes indicating her poverty. Mark calls her a "poor widow" as if widowhood were not a heavy enough burden to bear. There would be no pension for her. She'd have had to work from dawn to dusk to earn some money for her own daily bread and maybe also for her dependents her aged parents and her children. She could think of a host of sensible reasons for not giving money to the Lord. Surely He knew she had to live. People depended on her. She needed food for strength to work another day. Jesus says in the last words of the chapter that this money was all she had to live on. There were no public advantages to her for giving a couple of coins to the temple. Her name wouldn't be on any celebrity benefit's list; no bronze plaque was going to commemorate her gift; she wouldn't be given honors for her work to charity; she would not be having her picture taken sitting with an AIDS victim. So why give away what she herself needed so desperately, especially when there were rich people pouring thousands of coins every hour into the temple treasury? And what about this sick temple? Wasn't it desperately corrupt? Weren't the money changers rotten to the core? How much longer was it going to survive? What powerful arguments to focus on her conscience so that she ended up giving nothing to the Lord and taking everything home with her. God would vindicate her decision, wouldn't He? How easily the arguments could have raced through her mind. They seem to us unanswerable. And everywhere you meet religious folk who have found a dozen reasons for giving as little as they can to their local church. Of course, if it were their idea of a church with their idea of a minister and officers and services, then they would be giving sacrificially – so they tell themselves.

This poor widow wasn't aware that as she approached the treasury she'd caught the eye of the most important person in the universe, that He was watching her keenly, the only one that matters, God the Son. Jesus saw that she was holding two mites – one of those coins would have been her

salary for her day's work. The coins were called *leptas*; this was the smallest coin in circulation, and she proceeded to put both coins in the offering. They were too small to make any sound as they fell into the box. She could have put one in and bought food with the other, but she gave both. She wasn't putting in two copper coins; she was putting in everything! All that she had to live on she gave to God. She left her future with Him. She showed radical trust in God; He would supply all her need. Does anyone think she starved by doing what she did? There is surely a certain recklessness about giving ourselves to the Lord. I was talking to a Christian worker recently; we were discussing our futures, and he was saying how extraordinary it is that we know nothing at all about what lies ahead, and how in a moment our entire plans can be changed. This widow gave everything to God because she loved Him from her heart; she didn't give to get anything in return. She didn't think that if she gave two *leptas* to God He would give two hundred *leptas* to her. Good psychology; wretched theology. She gave to get nothing in return, simply out of her devotion to Him. "All I have is Thine. Here's my heart, my life." Jesus said that she had put more into the treasury than all the others. See the long procession of men with their bags of money waiting in line for their turn to tip their thousands of coins into the trumpets. She put in more than all of them combined.

There was once an aristocrat in Fife, Scotland, who condescended to go to church each Sunday morning, putting on the offering plate at the door a penny. One Sunday he made a terrible mistake and put on the plate a sovereign, and realized what he had done when he sat down in his pew. He got up and went back to the vestibule to try to exchange the sovereign for a penny. "Stop, laird," said the elder on duty. "You may put in what you like but you can take nothing out." And though he protested the elder was unyielding. "Well," he finally said to the elder, "I suppose I'll get credit for it in heaven." "No," said the elder, "you'll only get credit for a penny."

Here is the extraordinary contrast in the verses of our text between some men and a poor widow. They were famous for their religion while she wasn't. They had flowing robes while she had threadbare castoffs. They sat in the most important seats in the synagogues and in places of honor at banquets while she stood with the poor folks at the back. They could throw into the treasury vast sums of money because they'd stolen the contents of widows' houses, while she put in two mites. They were going to be severely punished while she was going to be eternally blessed. On the day of judgment would you rather be a famous religious person or this woman? How do you measure real sacrifice? By what you give? No, by what you keep.

What was the fundamental difference between these men and this woman? The fundamental difference between them was not one of gender or income or fame; it was the difference between their hearts. What's going on in our hearts makes all the difference. When we write our checks to the federal authorities they couldn't care less whether we did it with due appreciation for the benefits we get from our taxes or through clenched teeth. As long as the check doesn't bounce and it's for the correct amount, they are content. It is not so with giving to God. He loves a cheerful giver and He hates a reluctant giver. I can give all that I possess and surrender my body to be burned, but if I don't have love I gain nothing. Let me give a mere dollar to God with this widow's heart and it's great gain. What of a man who with bitterness and weariness gives out of a sense of obligation hoping that God will be merciful to him for doing that? Better for him to keep it. Please keep it. Please go to God and deal with your bitterness in God's sight and when your soul has been washed then come and give to the Lord in thankfulness. We don't need more money – no questions asked! Our congregation needs no pollution. We need loving sacrifices. We need gifts given with the positive spiritual quality of this widow. It is a privilege to give to God. What an honor that He might use our gifts as He pleases, and to help us to give in a way that pleases Him.

God can do great things with little things given to Him. A cup of cold water given to one of His disciples is a gift that actually refreshes God the Son. It will not lose its reward. This poor widow so privately bringing her insignificant offering to God couldn't dream that almost two thousand years later what she did would move a congregation thousands of miles away from the temple, and that she would become one of the most famous people in the world. When thousands of millionaires would be rotting in the ground she'd be living on in the memories of God's people and enjoying the presence of her Savior. At His right hand are pleasures for evermore. The day of judgment will reveal it all. It will square all the accounts. She will be exalted in that day.

There was once a missionary, the son of a widow, who went to work for Christ in west Africa. He was not there long before he contracted an illness and died. His brother was left at home and he came to his mother and said to her, "Mother, I want to go and take my place where my brother once worked. I will preach to my brother's people. I will tell them of my mother's and brother's God." She bade him farewell and off he went to west Africa, and before long he too became ill and died, and his grave lies next to his brother's. When the news reached home that she had lost her second son, many from her church came to see her and to sympathize; often she wept with them and they tried to comfort her. "You don't understand my tears," she said. "I am not weeping because I have two sons dead in west Africa, but because I don't have a third son I can send there."

Do you see what this passage is saying about you? You don't need religion; you need a new heart. This passage is saying that God doesn't need our money; God wants you to serve and love Him supremely. If money speaks, what does it say about you? What witness does it make about where your heart is? What does your giving tell God about you? As Sinclair Ferguson says,

*"God doesn't need your money. He requires no benefactors to help Him establish His kingdom. Nothing you can do or give will add to His riches; He owns the entire universe, and He can employ everything in it for His own holy purposes. Furthermore, He owns your money too. He is able to give it to you and withdraw it from you at a moment's notice. You are simply His steward. Anything you give to Him He has first given to you, like a father giving pocket money to his children to help them buy his birthday present!"*

*"God chooses to use whatever gifts He wants to further His kingdom. He can use a small gift for a great purpose and a great gift for a small purpose! With a great gift, a massive organization may be set up which is in constant financial difficulties and eventually goes bankrupt; with a small gift, a Gospel, or a New Testament may be purchased which leads to the conversion of someone who wins many others to Christ, or is the instrument of a great revival – or, for that matter, points a millionaire to Christ! Jesus is underlining this in what He says. If we grasp it, we would never be proud of the amount we give."*

(Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Mark*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1999, p. 209)

No gift is too small to give to God. No money, no time, no talent is too insignificant for you to bring to God today. Give it to God and it becomes a pearl of great price. This woman, said Jesus, laid down her whole life, and that is what Jesus did for us. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

The story is told of a woman who loved her great King as did all the people of his kingdom. They decided they would present him with a great gift to show their deep affection. All this woman had to give were two mites. She felt so ashamed as she lined up with all his other subjects and put in his hand their gift. When it was her turn she could not look into his face. She looked down to the ground and pressed the two mites into his hand and moved on. Then he called after her, "Was it you who gave me this?" he asked, and there in his hand were two pieces of gold covered in costly diamonds and flawless pearls. She stared at them. "No," she said, "I didn't give you those." "Look at them," he said. "Take them in your hands." She picked them off his hand and when she did all she was holding were two mites, but when she put them back in his hand they became pieces of gold covered in jewels. "Thank you," he said, "for the beautiful gift. I will treasure this forever," and he took the pieces of gold. They hang on a chain around his neck and they lie next to his heart, and he always thinks of her when he sees them, and whenever any poor man or woman, boy or girl is afraid to bring a little gift to him because it seems so small, he points to what he wears around his neck and says, "These two glorious jewels were once two mites and they pleased me as much as any gift I've ever received, for to me a person is accepted according to what he has, and not according to what he doesn't have."

Geoffrey Thomas