

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

³⁵ While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David?³⁶ David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

“‘The Lord said to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet.’”

³⁷ David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?”

The large crowd listened to him with delight.

³⁸ As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.⁴⁰ They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts.⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

-- Mark 12: 28-4

“Suspend everything you know about this story.” This is what I try to tell myself every time I tackle a new passage for a new sermon because the first task of exegesis is to get as close as you can to reading the text without presuppositions. Your expectations of this story are likely that you need to give until you have nothing left to live on—after all, that’s what the widow does. This is the interpretation I grew up with, but like you, I find that this is an interpretation that does not free me to offer more as much as it shames me into giving more. Jesus comes across as no better than my parents, who gave me a quarter every Sunday to teach me the importance of hearing the clink in the offering plate. All because of the widow who shows us all up.

But what if Jesus isn’t commending the widow for her generosity, but is merely commenting on it? What if, in fact, Jesus is condemning an oppressive religious culture that squeezes widows and orphans for everything they’ve got left to live on? What if Jesus isn’t saying “this woman is a model citizen of the Kingdom of God” and is instead saying “the Kingdom of God will change the way you worship forever”?

Before we start reading the story of the Widow’s Offering with fresh eyes, we need to say what this passage is *not* about: it is *not* about giving more money to the church. Now, this isn’t to say that you should *not* give more of what God has given you in grace, but that the lesson from this *particular* passage is *not* that you should drain your bank accounts and scupper your stock portfolios so that you can give more. If you want a sermon that makes you feel guilty, there are plenty of sermons online that you can download and apply so that you can operate out of old paradigms to your heart’s content. So if the story of the widow’s offering is *not* about giving more, then what is it about?

In order to answer that question, we need to look at the context in which this story rests. In chapter 11, Jesus entered Jerusalem cheered as a folk hero while riding on the back of a donkey. Following this is the Clearing of the Temple, or as I like to call it, the Angry Jesus I Never Knew (or

maybe had some idea of but just was afraid to ask). In his gospel, John records the incident as Jesus deliberately taking time to make a whip before kicking butt in the Temple Courts¹. John seems to say, then, that this was not an impulsive decision, but a *deliberate* show of resentment against the financial machinery surrounding the Temple. I used to feel pretty guilty of the fact that when I was young I sometimes sold boxes of mediocre chocolate almonds at church, but Jesus isn't against fund-raising for your swim club: he's against the obstruction of worship by unscrupulous people. Due to the Teachers of the Law decreeing that the only acceptable currency for offering would be Hebrew-minted currency, worshippers intent on offering money first had to have their Roman money changed into Hebrew tokens. This then would be changed back into Roman money by the Temple—all at ridiculously high exchange rates.

While Jesus clearing the Temple Courts doesn't seem to have much bearing on what happens in chapter 12, this is the incident that sparks a murder conspiracy against Jesus. Chapter 12 opens with the leaders of the three main branches of Judaism coming forward to test Jesus in order to try to discredit him as a teacher. They bait their trap with flattery, calling Jesus "Rabbi" (which comes from the Hebrew word for "master") before asking questions they think he can't answer without implicating himself as a terrorist, as ignorant, or both. Yet Jesus evades their traps.

However, the last question Jesus answers in Mark 12 is significant, because the very kind of person that Jesus is about to rip apart for loving their long robes and long prayers is the one of whom he says "*you are not far from the Kingdom of God.*"² This Teacher of the Law, seeing that Jesus answered his peers without breaking a sweat, asks "what *is* the greatest commandment?" Jesus replies with a mash-up of two different First Testament passages when he says, "*Hear, O Israel: The*

¹ John 2:15

² Mark 12:34

*Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*³ *The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*⁴

So far, I haven't said anything that is new or mind-blowing, but it's when we come to the passage directly before the widow's offering that we can start putting some pieces together. In vv. 38-40, Jesus turns on the Teachers of the Law and points out their hypocrisy. While they love to gorge themselves on public honour, they "devour widows' houses"—meaning they take money away from the poorest and most helpless people of that day. These so-called "Masters" had a showy but empty religion because neither God nor neighbours are loved while the Teachers are busy loving on themselves.

Here's where we put the pieces together. After successfully parrying all the attacks designed to bring him into public shame, Jesus takes a seat across from the area where pilgrims would line up to throw their offerings into trumpet-shaped boxes. He notices that the rich people throw in massive amounts of money, which because of the lack of paper currency and cheques in that day, was bound to make a lot of noise as it clattered down the treasury tube. He then sees an impoverished widow tossing her two tiny coins into the treasure chests, and calls his disciples to observe her do it.

This little detail is often overlooked—that what the widow does is a matter of importance for discipleship because Jesus purposely calls his followers to take note of the widow as he does. He then says, *"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."*

You've heard these two verses twice today; now read them again. Does Jesus say anything about how wonderful a sacrifice the widow makes? Does he say of her that she gives the best because she gives a greater proportion? What does Jesus say here? He says *"she gave more than*

³ Deut 6:4,5

⁴ Lev 19:18

the others” and “*she gave everything she had to live on*”, but Jesus does *not* say what she does is wise or commendable.

Remember the context: Jesus clears the Temple because of its greed. Jesus commends heartfelt devotion to God and neighbour but condemns practices designed to garner personal honour. Even more, in the very next chapter, Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that every one of the massive stones that make up Herod’s Temple will be thrown down—more context that tells us that Jesus is not impressed with the Temple nor the practices surrounding it. Could it be, then, that Jesus is lamenting the *way things are*? After all, the foreigner, the fatherless, widows and Levites were *all* to be cared for out of the tithes of others⁵—yet here is a widow who isn’t. Could it be that Jesus is angered and saddened by a system that forces widows to give up everything they have to live on while the Torah itself is being ignored?

Maybe.

A close reading of the text and context doesn’t give us every right to impose our own meaning on it. The truth is, we don’t actually know whether Jesus is outright commending the woman or condemning the system. However, I submit to you this: maybe he’s doing both.

We know that the system was and is oppressive towards the poor, and we know that Jesus does say discipleship is a matter of giving up one’s whole life to follow him.⁶ Yet because the text is actually a great deal more mysterious than it appears, perhaps we ought to look deeper. If the widow was a victim, shame on the system. If the widow was being more generous than us, shame on us. Yet Jesus makes neither of these comments.

There is a high degree of foolishness associated with how the widow offers. She has to know that her pennies won’t help towards the Temple’s renovation budget or the upkeep of the priests.

⁵ Deut 26:12-13

⁶ Mark 8:34

She doesn't have to give *everything* either—she could just give one of the two coins, and even then, that one coin is barely enough to buy a handful of grain. And she also has to know that after this, she has nothing left to live on. She doesn't have a bank account. She doesn't have children to support her. All she has to live on are these two insignificant coins worth practically nothing. So what does she do with them?

She throws them in with the bags of gold the rich people are giving as well.

Whether you want to read the story of the widow's offering as a warning against rich oppressors or as an encouragement to give sacrificially, the one thing everyone *can* agree on is the sheer audacity of the widow's gift. There are echoes here of the woman who breaks a horrendously expensive jar of perfume over Jesus' feet, an act of worship that Christ himself guarantees⁷ will be remembered for all time. It's also an act of worship that Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, thought was dumb.

The Widow's Offering is also well-remembered, though perhaps not for the right reasons. We read it and we feel guilty for not giving ten percent. Or else we read it and become indignant about the oppression of the poor. Yet I wonder if God does not remember it and remark upon it because at the very bottom of such giving is a radical trust in God to provide. Perhaps such a reading doesn't fit the context as another explanation might, but in view of the confusion over why Mark writes this down, surely just as good a reason as any is the complete abandon with which the widow gives. She does not just give ten percent. She doesn't give twenty percent. She doesn't give thirty percent, or forty percent, or even half of everything she has to live on—she gives it *all* away.

The best question to ask of the text at this point isn't "how" but "why". Why would she give it all away? What could compel that kind of sacrificial giving?

⁷ Mark 14:9

A solution lies in the way Jesus straight-answers the Teacher of the Law in vv. 29-31. If you know the Gospels, you know that a straight answer from Jesus is rarer than diamonds. But I have to imagine that Jesus speaks so plainly for once because it provides the best context for why a person would choose to worship so self-sacrificially: for love. The system may be oppressing her, but the woman chooses a way of faithful, exuberant obedience born out of a desire to honour the God of her people. In order to ascribe worth to Yahweh, she gives all that she has to live on in trust that somehow, the God she worships with this money will somehow meet her in her destitution. She could have gone home and kept those two coins for herself, but no, faithful obedience demands it of her, even though those two coins wouldn't make much of a difference. But this is all she's got, and even though it's less than two pennies, she gives it in faith and trust. This, friends, is what it means to worship.

We're so used to having everything our way and being catered to in our churches that obedient worship sounds like a curse word. This is very difficult for us to understand, especially as we celebrate with places like Tunisia and Egypt over their newfound freedom from tyrants. We can't fathom a life where we cannot do what we like when we like, not to mention that we think missing a single meal is what it means to go hungry. In offering so extravagantly, the widow not only is a probable victim of the religious system Jesus hated but she is also likely to have had to beg for her next meal. Yet the widow is remarkable because of her obedience to the Torah, even if the tithes were not given back to her as was prescribed by that same Torah⁸. She is noteworthy because she is faithful. She trusts that God will provide for her despite this massive injustice; and she is exuberant in that she gives more than she can afford.

⁸ Deut 14:29, 26:12-13

The widow's little coins aren't going to get the new Temple library named after her, but loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength means giving worship all you've got. Many of us look at ourselves and think that what we've got can't possibly be enough. We don't have the degrees or learning. We don't have the right kind of family background or status. We get tongue-tied when we have to speak or pray in public. We look at our gifts and think no one wants or needs them.

Guess what? We have a God who chooses the foolish to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong. Jesus takes five loaves and two fish and feeds thousands. And a widow's two cents are costly beyond measure. Today, as we learn to look at an old story in a new way, we might also learn to see ourselves in a new way. Maybe you think you don't have much to offer, but that's all right. What you need to offer for God and for his Kingdom is expensive, but it's something we all can afford: our willingness and our trust. From these, God can take your life and multiply it beyond your imagining. What you must not do is hold so tight to yourself—or what you think of yourself—that you cannot offer anything except in fear.

The two little coins that are most precious to us all are our willingness and trust. We don't know how God will use them or use us. We hope that he's as good as he says he is. We hope we don't get exposed as being naïve or reckless. Yet with what little willingness we have, and with what trust we have, God takes and multiplies both before giving them back to us. Then, we give again—this time giving more willingness, more trust because we have more to give. The cycle keeps going, sisters and brothers, until we learn to live in God, which is the Kingdom of God itself.