

Mark 12:41-44

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[0 : 00] Today, we are celebrating giving. We remember and celebrate the Father's giving of His Son to die on the cross in our place. We ponder on and delight in the Son's giving over of Himself to death for us and in our stead. We will listen again to the words of Jesus addressed to His disciples at the first Lord's Supper. This is My body given for you.

As Jesus approached that great day when He would give Himself over to death, the place and importance of giving was evidently to the fore in His thinking and in His discourse. Mark records for us how Jesus, as Golgotha increasingly casts a shadow over Him, identified the greatest commandment as one that involves the giving of self unreservedly and wholeheartedly to God. We've read in the passage that we read a few moments ago of this greatest commandment, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And soon after stating this truth, Jesus witnesses the selfsame truth enfleshed in the person of a poor and marginalized widow. This evening, I want to think of this widow and the lessons that we learn in this matter of giving as we consider her. And we're going to read now the verses that follow on from where we left our reading just a few moments ago in Mark's Gospel in chapter 12 and reading from verse 41. We'll read through to the end of the chapter.

And as we do read, just bear in mind what we've been noting, that Jesus has just been teaching on the matter of giving. He has identified that the greatest commandment involves the giving of self to God.

And those who heard, though they understood the words, many of them perhaps, all of them really didn't grasp the significance of what He was saying. So few of them lived lives that reflected the teaching they were being given. But here Jesus is given the thrill of witnessing one who did.

[2 : 44] And we want to think about that this evening. So, Mark chapter 12 and from verse 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, but a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling His disciples to Him, Jesus said, I tell you the truth, 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. That part of the chapter begins, Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched.

He sat down and watched. Now, if we just think about that for a moment, I don't know if it's something you've ever given thought to. It does seem a very peculiar, maybe even inappropriate thing to do, to sit down and to watch as people make their offerings. And the language that Mark uses does suggest a deliberate intention on the part of Jesus to watch as people give. It's not that He just happened to be there and saw what was going on. No, it was Jesus' intention to watch as the worshipers gathered in the court of the women and made their offerings. No doubt, the location itself, as I've just mentioned, the court of the women within the temple complex, and indeed the general commotion of worshipers coming and going, would have allowed Jesus to watch discreetly, so that those observed were, I am sure, blissfully unaware of being observed at all.

The rich people as they made their offerings, the widow as she placed her coins in the collection box, I'm sure they weren't conscious of the fact that Jesus was there watching them as they did so. And though it was discreet, or so it would appear, it does remain intriguing that Jesus would spend time watching folk as they placed their money into the collection boxes. Of course, nowadays, most people use a direct debit, and it's not an activity where you literally or physically put money in a plate, but if we just cast our minds back to when that's what we would have done as we came into church and put money in the collection plate, I think many would find it quite disconcerting if

somebody was there watching as you did so. It does seem an unusual thing to do. Well, I want us this evening briefly to imagine ourselves seated where Jesus sat watching and pose the question, what did Jesus see as He watched? Mark tells us that He sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched, and then He goes on and tells us what it was that He watched. Well, what is it that Jesus saw?

[6 : 12] The first thing I want to mention is perhaps the most obvious one, and it's the one that Mark tells us. He saw the crowd. He watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Jesus saw what anybody who had chosen to sit where He sat would have seen. The crowds of worshipers entering the court of the women and placing their offering in one of the thirteen collection boxes located in that court for that purpose.

Those who know of these things tell us that these particular boxes had trumpet-like openings that allowed for the worshiper to place their offering very easily.

But as Jesus watched, He could distinguish between the worshipers, and He could distinguish particularly between those who are described as the rich people and this poor widow. He sees them all, but He distinguishes between one group and one individual. The rich people, and we're told there were many of them, threw in large amounts, to use the language of the passage. And as we read this passage, and maybe as we think of our own ideas about it, maybe that we already had even before this evening, the occasion is one that perhaps most of us, maybe all of us, are very familiar with. Maybe we have the idea that what Mark is suggesting is that these rich worshippers gave very ostentatiously as they made their offering. But really, if we read the passage and take it at face value, and indeed there's the parallel passage in

Luke's Gospel, there's no reason to be so judgmental, as it were, in our judgment on the rich folk who were making their giving. There's nothing to suggest in the actual verses before us that they were doing so in some pompous way. They were rich, and they made their offerings, and their offerings were, in monetary terms, large. People could see that, because if you looked, you could see, not because they were making a scene of it. Indeed, we're told that Jesus was equally able to see the widow as she gave. So, the fact that He was able to see what they were doing certainly doesn't lead us, or wouldn't lead us to legitimately conclude that there was necessarily any ostentation on the part of the rich folk who are gathering there. The reality is that if anybody watched carefully as Jesus did, they would have been able to see what it was that the worshippers were giving. Some suggest that not only see, but maybe even hear. The size of the coins as they came into the box, perhaps, would allow you to have an idea of what it was that had been placed there. Whatever the means, Jesus was able to see as anybody else would have been able to see. What it was that was being placed in the collection box. Now, in the case of the widow, we're told very precisely what she gave. We're told that she gave two very small copper coins. Now, the Greek word here that is being translated in this way is a word *lepta*. Now, I've never been on holiday to Greece, but those of you who have will maybe be familiar with that, because I'm told, although now they're struggling with the euro, but when the drachma was the currency in Greece, apparently the drachma was divided into 100 *lepta*.

[9 : 58] So, the very same word was used until very recent times. But of course, of interest to us is the value of those coins at the time that we are considering when Jesus was in the temple. And without going into a grand explanation, the reality is that it was a minuscule amount, a very, very small amount.

Some suggest that one of these coins, of course there were two, but one of these coins is the equivalent of one 128th of a denarius. And I'm sure you've heard how a denarius was the coin that was given to a day laborer for a day's work. So, you can just work it out. Less than one percent of what an unskilled laborer would receive. This is the value of these coins. And the poor widow placed two of them in the collection box. Jesus evidently was watching very carefully as the scene unfolded, and it would appear that so were the disciples. Because as Jesus goes on to speak to them about what He has witnessed, the presumption is that they have also seen what He saw. Of course, it's possible that what Mark records for us isn't the whole scene, but certainly if we go on what Mark records for us, there is a presumption that the disciples also had witnessed this. And Jesus doesn't need to explain what has been seen. They saw it also. What Jesus does is draw lessons from what all had witnessed. So, what did

Jesus see as He watched? Well, as we're told by Mark, and as it's recorded for us, He saw the crowds, He saw the rich people, He saw the poor widow, and He saw what they gave as part of the

worship that they were offering to God. But what else did He see? Well, I think we can also say that He saw their hearts.

He saw the crowds. He saw what anybody could have seen, indeed what many did see, including the disciples, but Jesus also sees their hearts. In commenting on and in drawing lessons from the scene, Jesus reveals a depth of insight involved in His watching. In actual fact, the word that Mark uses here that is translated watched can have that deeper sense of perceiving or drawing conclusions from what is observed, not simply seeing what is going on, but perceiving what is going on, drawing conclusions from what you're able to see. And in the case of Jesus, we can say that He saw beyond the outward acts to the inward disposition, or to put it in the way that I've chosen to put it, He saw their hearts. Now, it is true that even those devoid of divine insight could have concluded that what the woman gave represented a greater act of generosity than what the rich people gave, though to have come to that conclusion, I suppose, would have involved a reasonable element of speculation as to the relative wealth or poverty of those observed.

But in what Jesus affirms, it is clear that His insight goes beyond reasonable speculation, both in the case of what He concludes concerning the rich people and what He concludes concerning the poor widow. And if we think of both of these in turn, first of all, the rich people. Jesus, in His developing of the scene or in His commenting on the scene, states that these people gave out of their wealth, or we could translate that, they gave out of their abundance. And the word that is used here carries the idea of that which is superfluous or that which is excess. To put it another way, Jesus is saying that these people, though what they gave was large in the amount, was what they did not require.

[14:27] They gave what they did not need. What these people did is give what they would not miss. They gave to God having already kept what they considered that they needed or desired for themselves. It has been helpfully put that what really matters in this question of giving is not the amount that one gives, but the amount that one keeps for oneself. And this is what Jesus was able to see of these rich people.

He was able to discern. He was able to see their hearts that what they were giving, though large in terms of the monetary amount, was out of their excess. It was what was left over. It didn't carry any spiritual worth. It was of no spiritual value. And Jesus watches, and He's able to come to this judgment on the spiritual health of the rich givers. And this conclusion is indeed a sobering one. What they gave was of no spiritual value. It did not constitute worship that is acceptable to God. It was part of worship. It is, as we use the language, an element of worship, but it was not true worship in the case of these rich folk who were gathering there in the temple. Jesus sees their hearts and is able to come to that conclusion. We could not have come to that conclusion. We might have speculated that that was the case for some of them, but we wouldn't have been able to come to that conclusion. Jesus was able to come to that conclusion. But also concerning the poor widow. In the case of the widow, we discern even greater insight in the one who watches, in Jesus. Jesus states that she put in everything, all she had to live on. And we're not to consider this, as some have, as justified hyperbole for dramatic effect. Jesus is wanting to make a point, and so He dramatizes the scene somewhat and uses this very dramatic language. She's put in everything, all that she had to live on. But of course, that's not actually literally the case. We've no reason to question Jesus' conclusion or Jesus' statement that this is indeed what the woman was doing. She was putting in everything she had, all that she had to live on.

And Jesus is able, as He was able with the rich folk, He is able to come to a judgment on this woman's spiritual condition. And He concludes that she is a woman rich in faith, and her worship is not only acceptable, but profoundly pleasing to her God. Jesus declares that what she has given is of greater spiritual value than all the other offerings combined. There in verse 43, I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. And the manner in which Mark describes this for us makes it clear that Jesus is not saying that her offering was greater than the offering of any one of these rich people. He's saying something much more dramatic, if you wish. What Jesus is saying is that her offering alone, these two coins, would have greater value than all the other put together of all these rich people who were making their offerings.

That's a very dramatic thing to say, a very bold conclusion to come to on the part of Jesus. And it would be good for us just very briefly to consider some of the characteristics of her giving that lead Jesus to commend her in such terms. And let's just notice three characteristics of the giving of this poor widow. And as we do, it's an opportunity to examine ourselves in this matter of giving. I think

one thing we can say about the giving of this poor widow is that it was faithful giving. And I'm using the word faithful in the sense of evidencing a deep trust in God. The words that Jesus uses, that she gave all she had to live on, are very vivid. And they're vivid in the sense that they allow us to picture this woman giving the coins that she had and all she had to buy food for her children, if indeed she had children, to buy oil for her lamp or sandals for her child. All she had to live on, these two coins, she gives to God.

She chooses to forgo essentials in order to give to God. Her giving is faithful giving.

[19 : 39] I wonder, did the woman, in actual fact, I'm going to make a wee confession here, I don't know if confession is the right word, but I've just given the explanation to the second characteristic of her giving as being sacrificial. And I jumped over what I was going to say about faithful giving. So, if you just bear with me and we'll just backtrack to what I was going to say about faithful giving.

I wonder, as the woman gave, faithful in the sense of a deep trust in God, I wonder, as the woman gave, did she imagine that she and her children would go hungry that day?

Well, I don't know, but I think not. She trusted in God. Just imagine, if you will, this woman as she looked at the two coins in the palm of her hand, these two tiny coins.

She's approaching the temple and these are the two coins she has and she's thinking, what do I do with these two coins? I'm going to the temple and at the temple, part of my worship is to bring an offering. What do I do with these two coins? Well, maybe I could put one of them in. Or maybe she could have said, well, the Lord knows my circumstances.

I'm sure he will understand if I don't put either of them in. Or will I put both of them in? Well, whatever her thinking was, she placed both of the coins and she did so as a means, or not really as a means, but in so doing, she gives evidence of her trust in God, that God would supply what she needed. God would supply. And so, she can give the two coins in that confidence. Her giving was faithful giving. She trusted in God. But the second characteristic, and I've already jumped forward to that by mistake, her second characteristic of this giving is that it was sacrificial giving. The words of Jesus that she gave all that she had to live on, they very much illustrate this aspect of her giving. This woman choosing to forgo that which was even essential that she might give to God. But the third characteristic that we can identify in the giving of this widow is that it was loving giving. And love for whom? Love for whom is demonstrated by her giving these two coins into the collection box. Well, if we think just for a moment on what these offerings were for. Now, it's quite a complex arrangement that was in place in the temple with all the different offerings. But if we did have to summarize, we could say that the two principal purposes of these offerings were, first of all, for the sustenance of the priests, and so the givings were used to provide for the priests, and also to provide for the poor. These offerings also serve to help the poor in the land. So, the widow, as she makes this offering, is giving expression to her love for God, as she seeks to provide for God's servants, and also, very intriguingly, of her love for her own neighbors, for the poor. Such is her love that she seems oblivious to the fact that she was way poorer than many of those who would profit from her generosity. And so, as she gives, her giving is characterized by this love, this love for God, and this love for others. Well, Jesus sees the crowds, but He also sees their hearts. He sees the hearts of those who He describes as many rich people, and He sees the heart also of this poor widow. But there is a final thing that I want to suggest that Jesus sees, as He sat there opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched. He saw the crowds,

[23 : 44] He saw their hearts, but also He sees Himself. Now, why do we say that? How can we justify saying that? Perhaps in introducing, explaining further what I mean by saying that Jesus saw Himself, just notice the circumstances that Jesus finds Himself in. He, as we commented at the beginning, has been teaching on the very subject of wholehearted giving. And yet, even His nearest and dearest don't get it. They don't get what He's saying. This inability or unwillingness to understand is vividly illustrated in what follows, certainly in the case of the disciples. And this inability of the disciples, or unwillingness of the disciples to get what Jesus is teaching, is maybe especially evident in Luke's account of this incident. So, if we quickly turn to Luke chapter 21 and verse 5, hopefully we'll be able to explain what it is we're getting at. In Luke chapter 21 and verse 5, notice that in the first four verses we have really a very similar account of the widow's offering. But then in verse 5 we read, "...some of His disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God." Now, notice that both Mark and Luke place these words of the disciples immediately following their account of the widow's offerings. And it seems reasonable to presume that they did follow on each other. So, do you not see the

irony here or the inability of the disciples to get it? Jesus has been saying, look, this woman is impressive. She is somebody you should be amazed by. Her generosity, her sacrifice, her commitment, her faith, her love. And even as He is teaching it would seem, the disciples are muttering among themselves, they look at these amazing gifts that people have given, these amazing stones, I wonder how much they're worth. They just don't get it. They don't want to get it or they're unwilling to get it. I wonder how discouraging that must have been for Jesus as He taught them concerning the greatest commandment to love God with all your heart and mind and strength and soul as He wasted Himself, as it were, in seeking to explain to them these truths of great importance, and they just don't get it. And as He is surrounded by such hardness of heart, the widow appears to bring satisfaction to his soul. In a temple devoid of true devotion, this poor woman is an oasis of piety and spiritual beauty for Jesus to look on and admire and enjoy.

But why do we say, or why did I say a moment ago that Jesus sees Himself? Well, bear with me as I draw the comparisons. What did we notice were the characteristics of this woman's giving? Well, we said it was faithful giving. It evidenced a deep trust in God. We said that it was sacrificial giving. We said that it was loving giving. And I ask you, what does that look like? Or who does that look like? What supreme act of giving can be similarly described as faithful, as sacrificial, as loving? Well, is it not the act of giving that this evening we will be remembering? This act of giving in which Jesus gave Himself gave Himself to us. Jesus gave Himself over to death in an act of absolute faith or trust in His Father. His Father would vindicate Him. His Father would raise Him triumphant and vindicated.

And as He handed Himself over to death, He could do nothing but trust. Jesus gave Himself over to death in an act of unparalleled sacrifice. He gave, to use the language that Jesus uses of the widow, He gave everything. Indeed, He gave beyond all He had to live on. He gave His own life. And Jesus gave Himself over to death as an act of love, of love for His Father and of love for His fellow men and women, submerged in grinding, spiritual poverty. And so, as Jesus watched this poor widow, He not only saw it as an opportunity to teach some hard lessons on Christian giving, important though that no doubt is, Jesus also saw something in this woman of His own love, a love that would keep His feet on the path marked out and His sight fixed, on Calvary. And He saw this woman, and He was satisfied by what He saw."

[29 : 10] Now, before we participate in the sacrament, I'll just say a little more about this. But at this point, we will close with a word of prayer.

Have a nice day.