

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Mark 12:13-17, 28-37, 41-44

Sermon Title: "A Poor Widow's Shining Example" (Still another Sermon on the Amount)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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{SLIDE 1} We spoke about the widow with a few pennies last week. We talked about how many people were giving money to the temple in Jerusalem, walking up to these treasury chests and placing coins inside. We talked about the wealthy individuals who were placing vast amounts of cash in the treasury chests, possibly making a display of it while they did. But then we talked about Jesus, who notices one poor widow who had little money to speak of. What money she had she probably had to hold onto for dear life, because no other money would buy her food. Yet she walks up to the treasure chests of the temple like everyone else and she places two small copper coin inside. They barely make a sound as they fall on top of the other money. Jesus lifts up this widow as our shining example to follow. "The rest gave out of their abundance," he says, "but this woman gave out of her poverty," giving everything she had to God in worship.¹

¹ Mark 12:44

{SLIDE 2} There are a bunch of stories that lead up to this story about a poor widow. One might not think that all of them come together into a nice little puzzle, but from a certain angle one might think they fit together nicely. One builds on top of the other, until you come to the end in which a poor widow illustrates all of them through her simple act.

Our first story has to do with taxes, the taxes one must pay to the Roman government. During Jesus' time there were many Jews who believed it was ungodly to pay anything to a foreign government. These Romans are not "of God," and so faithful followers of God should not finance any of their enterprises such as building roads or constructing buildings. However, Roman occupation dictates that everyone should pay taxes, even the Jews. They had to commit themselves to the welfare of the Roman Empire, whether they liked it or not.

One day a group of Pharisees confront Jesus about taxes. "Is it lawful to pay them or not?" they ask.² This is a loaded question. It is lawful according to the Roman government to pay taxes, or else you will be punished. But is it lawful according to God's law? Does God approve of Jews paying foreign taxes to

² Mark 12:14.

ungodly people? If Jesus says yes, then he can be condemned as a Roman sympathizer. He will lose credit with the people. But if Jesus says it is not lawful, he can be condemned as an insurrectionist, a rebel who wants to overthrow the Roman government. What to do?

{SLIDE 3} You know what is interesting about the image on a Roman coin? It is the image of the ruler who is currently alive. Our money doesn't have pictures of people on them who are currently alive. Washington, Lincoln, Grant: all presidents who are now dead. Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton: both dead. If we lived in Great Britain or Canada, for example, we would find the image of Queen Elizabeth II on the money. She is still alive.

There is something about having a leader on the money, especially if that leader is alive. It is as though he is near you – it is as though he is always watching you. You cannot get away from the probing eyes of this leader. You cannot escape the power this leader holds over you. He is always there, even on the money.

With this in mind, consider the question of the Pharisees to Jesus. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to

Caesar?” Caesar is always watching you, even on the money. Caesar knows what is right and what is wrong.

So does God. In fact, God is truly able to see us unlike Caesar. God is truly present with us, unlike the Roman Emperor or any other leader on earth. Jesus asks for a coin minted with the ubiquitous (ever-present) Caesar on it. “Whose head is on this, and whose name is inscribed?” Jesus asks. They know who. Jesus then says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give to God the things that are God’s.”³ Who is truly watching us? Who truly knows our hearts? Who truly watches our actions and sense our motivations? Who truly tells us what is right and wrong, and show us always how to do what is right. If Cesar wants back the coin with his face on it, let him have it. But what about the One who never leaves us, never abandons us, neither sleeps nor slumbers, just as Caesar does?

{SLIDE 4} We jump ahead to the poor widow who gives her coins to the temple. It doesn’t matter whose image is on it. It doesn’t matter if the coin will eventually go back to Caesar and enrich him. She is going to give to the One who sees her, and blesses her.

³ Mark 12:17, paraphrased.

She gives to her God everything she has, because only God will see through each day. She cannot escape God's watch – she cannot run away from God's power – and she doesn't want to. She wants God to see all the good she can for God's temple, for God's people, for God's kingdom. She is blessed for her faithfulness.

{SLIDE 5} Let us go now to Mark 12:28. It is now the scribes turn to pose the questions to Jesus. It seems the issue of taxes didn't faze Jesus, so the scribes ask about Commandments.

One of these scribes asks which of the Ten Commandments is the greatest. "If we were going to live our lives according to one Commandments," the scribe basically asks, "which one is first and foremost?"⁴ Jesus' answer is not one particular Commandment such as "Have no false gods" or "Do not steal," but all of them put together. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; AND you shall love your neighbor as yourself."⁵ The love of God covers the first four Commandments, and the love of neighbor covers the

⁴ Mark 12:28.

⁵ Mark 12:29-31.

other six. All the Biblical scholars would agree to this. Even the scribe who asks Jesus the question already knows the answer.

{SLIDE 6} Another title for scribe is *expert of the law*.⁶ Their whole profession was to interpret the law of God and to be the skilled professional when it came to communicating the law's rules and regulations. The scribes told everybody how to act and think and worship. These scribes would pour over God's law day after day, and they would have lively discussion amongst themselves as to what God is trying to tell God's people. We can be sure that this scribe in Mark 12 and others like him studies constantly the Ten Commandments, and every one of them came to the same conclusion that all ten could be summarized with just two: The love of God and the love of neighbor.

We can tell that the scribes knew the answer that Jesus gave, because this one scribe in Mark 12 responds by saying, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'God is one, and besides him there is no other.'; and 'to love God' with all your being and 'to love neighbor as self' – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Jesus is impressed by this scribes answer. Jesus

⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, cf. 306.

tells him that he is not far from the kingdom of God.

{SLIDE 7} One more time we go back to the widow who gave her all. We don't know if this widow knew that the Ten Commandments could be summarized with just two commandments. She might not have known everything there is to know about the law of God. She knew enough and acted on it. She knew how to love God and even love others, and so she moved forward and gave everything she owned.

The first thing Jesus says in Mark 12:29 is "Hear, O Israel." The Hebrew word is *Shema*. *Shema* isn't a nice request for the people to listen to something. It is a call to action. When people spoke or read the words *Shema*, they knew that had to get up and do something, just as soon as God gave the instructions. Jesus calls the scribe and the people around him to listen and to do without hesitation. Not only hear how you are to love God, do it. Not only hear how to love others do it. Don't sit back and think about it, do it. Don't sit back and feel good about it, do it.

The problem with the scribes that Jesus ran into was they knew almost everything about the law, but they did nothing. They sat comfortably with their scrolls and interpreted words, but the words did not

move them to the core. The words did not stir compassion within them to get up and go out. “Do not just be hearers of the word and deceive yourselves,” James will later write in his letter, “Be doers of God’s word.”⁷

Shema, call to action. Was the scribe that Jesus spoke to more than a reader and interpreter? Is that why Jesus told him that he was not too far away from salvation, that he needed to be more of a doer than a hearer from now on? Who knows? We know the widow at the end of Mark 12 was a doer. She heard the call, she looked at what she could give, she got up, and she placed her sole possessions in the treasury chest. She stood on the doorstep of the kingdom of God.

{SLIDE 8} We now turn to Mark 12:35-37. Jesus poses a question that we might not completely understand. Here is the gist of the argument: Who is the Messiah really? What is the Messiah, the Christ, supposed to look like, supposed to do and say?

Apparently the scribes have poured over these pieces of Scripture to figure out who the Messiah is. They may have looked at Psalm 110:1, which Jesus

⁷ James 1:22.

quotes in Mark 12:36: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand...’” The Messiah must be David’s Son, but is David’s Son supposed to become a great military and political leader that will gather together Israel as one unit, and push the Roman foreigners out of Jerusalem and back to Rome? Some of the people believe this. If this is so, then the Messiah should be a Savior who uses force to get the job done. He is the all-powerful Christ that makes people’s knee bend in submission, and there is nothing they can do about it.

Yet, Jesus challenges this idea in Mark 12. If David calls this Messiah Lord, how can this Messiah be David’s Son? Wouldn’t the Son call David Lord, because David is the father? We are supposed to show proper respect our fathers and mothers. David would never call his Son Lord... Unless David knew something about this Son that the scribes haven’t figured out... Unless David believed his future Son to be the Messiah at some point, and this Messiah would be more than just a descendant of his royal line. This Messiah would be more than what everybody would expect him to be. He would be Lord and Savior, rescuing his people not with military might but with his sacrificial blood. He would save his people not from foreign enemies but from the greatest enemies

that would destroy humanity: sin and death. “The kingdom that [Jesus] brings is greater than that of ‘our father David’; it is the kingdom of [God] the Father.”⁸

{SLIDE 9} The widow who give all her income to the temple is giving to the kingdom of God, which she believes in. She is giving money to the God who will present the Messiah, and will save people from their sin, and suffering will be no more. The widow believes that God can remove pain, even her pain of being a lonely widow. She believes God can remove frustration, even her frustration of being a person on her own without any means of support. She believe God can and will restore a person in body, mind, and spirit, even this poor person with whom nobody seems to bother.

She doesn't give a tithe – 10% - to the temple. She gives it all. She is all-in with what God is doing with her city, with her people, and with people like her who are broken and miserable and in need of a Savior. She wants to be a part of that work. She wants to give what she can, answer the call as it comes to her, be a faithful disciples even with the little she has, and help the kingdom of God to expand and reach all people.

This one poor widow is our shining example. Her

⁸ David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*, 478.

story motivates us to do all we can for God's kingdom. We give to the One who sees us, and who blesses us. We love the Lord our God with all our time, our talents, and our tithes, everything about us. We answer God's call to reach out and help when and where we can. God's kingdom will go to every corner of the world and touch every person.

The Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the good news! Who is in the position to condemn us? Only Jesus Christ is, and he died for us. Christ rose for us. Christ reigns in power for us. Christ intercedes for us. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has begun. Friends, believe the gospel: in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.