The Widow’s Mite

Text: Mark 12:38-13:2

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**Scriptures:** 2 Corinthians 9:6-9; 1 Kings 17:7-16; Mark 12:38-13:2

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 122, 82, 294, 266, 249

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#44)

**Theme:**  In the Court of the Women, Jesus saw a poor widow put a very small sum of money into the temple treasury and commended her for her proportional generosity in contrast to the less liberal gifts of the wealthy.

**Proposition:**  Give cheerfully and generously in proportion to what you have.

**Introduction**

Do you know what a mite is? It is a very small creature. Most mites are less than 1 mm in length. Mites are part of the arachnid family of eight-legged arthropods. Larger members of this family include spiders and scorpions. Our passage today at the end of Mark chapter 12 is often referred to as “the widow’s mite”, although ‘the widows mites’ would be more accurate. Here in our text from Mark’s gospel, the word ‘mite’ refers to something very small – but not a tiny spider like creature, but a 1st century Roman coin. The English word ‘mite’ was used in the King James Bible to translate the Greek word ‘lepta’.

The lepta was the smallest Roman coin being worth 1/64 of a denarius – a larger coin worth approximately the equivalent of a day’s wage for a common worker. The minimum wage in New Zealand is currently $22.70 per hour (effective 1 April 2023). So for an eight-hour day, the pre-tax income for someone on the minimum wage is $181.60. A lepta, or mite, would therefore be worth just under $3 (if we ignored any adjustment for taxation differences between then and now).

A clear message from our text is that the Lord sees and values what many people of think of as small, unimportant and of little significance. Today’s Sunday School breakup reflects the value and importance that we, as a church, place on the children who are part of this church. Small, yes mostly (from an adult viewpoint). Dependent on their parent, parents or caregiver for food, clothing, shelter, and other needs. Yes. Unable to earn much, if any, money themselves. Yes. Yet still able to contribute very significantly to the work of the Lord here and the life of this congregation. This morning we are going to look at our text in three parts:

1. The magnificent temple
2. The poor widow
3. The judgement of Christ
4. **The magnificent temple**

Here in Christchurch, we lost most of the larger older buildings in the 2010-2011 earthquakes. The Christchurch cathedral was an impressive structure and is now being restored. Elsewhere in the world there are even larger, more ornate and valuable buildings. For example: St Paul’s cathedral in London, built in 1710. The Marina Bay Sands hotel in Singapore, built in 2010. Osaka Castle, Japan, built in 1583.

The Temple in Jerusalem, where we find Jesus in our text, was incredibly magnificent. Mark records, that as Jesus’ disciples left this huge structure, they said to him: “*Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!*” (Mark 13:1). King Herod the Great enlarged the previously existing temple in Jerusalem which had been rebuilt when the exiles returned from Babylon with Ezra and Nehemiah. This previous rebuild was a much small structure than the original temple constructed under Solomon’s reign. For Herod, this was his grand personal ‘legacy project’. Jewish historian Josephus wrote: ‘*Herod undertook a very great work, that is to build of himself the temple of God, and make it large in compass, and to raise it to a most magnificent altitude, as esteeming it to be the most glorious of all his actions, as it really was, to bring it to perfection, and that this would be sufficient for an everlasting memorial of him*’.

Construction began in 23 BC when about 18,000 workers and 1,000 priests enlarged the foundation platform. The basic floor plan matched that of Solomon’s temple, but the architecture was Greco-Roman. Herod doubled height of the main temple building and adorned it with heavy gold plate. He used massive stone blocks, which were designed to impress. The marvelling disciples were certainly impressed, as Mark records in 13:1. The central temple construction was completed in 18 months, but the outer courts were not finished until AD 63.

The Court of the Gentiles was the vast area surrounded by covered colonnade porches where money was exchanged, and animals sold for sacrifice. It has been estimated that this court would have been able to hold about 75,000 people (Meyers and Strange). This area was as close as Gentiles could get to the temple itself. Israelites could climb further up the temple mount and closer to the Holy of Holies by entering the court of the Israelites, also referred to as the court of the men and the court of the women. At certain times of the year the men and women were separated so that only the men could be in the court itself, with the women looking on from the balconies surrounding the court. The court of the women was as close as those of the female gender could be to the Holy of Holies.

The temple treasury, referred to in verse four, was located in this court. There were 13 offering boxes called shophars in this court. You might recognise this word because it is also the name of a hollow musical instrument made from a ram’s horn and sounding a little bit like a bugle when blown into. The shophar collection boxes were shaped a bit like the end of a French horn or large trombone, a wide entrance narrowing down as a metal funnel into a wooden box below. As people donated money into the temple treasury, their coins would make a resonating noise as they were thrown into the mouth of the shophar and then made their way loudly down to the box below. The more that was thrown into the offering box, the greater the sound. In was in this court, where people were putting money into these offering boxes that Jesus sat down and watched as ‘*many people put in large sums*’ (v41). Then a poor widow came, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The poor widow**

Some here today are widows and widowers, but most are not. To be a widow or widower is to live with the ongoing grief of having lost a husband or a wife. To be a widow or widower (who has not remarried) is likely to live alone, or at least for many to be more alone than when their spouse was alive. To be a widow today can mean financial hardship to a greater or lesser degree as well as the challenges of doing many tasks that your husband used to take care of.

Back in Bible times, and still in many parts of the world, to be a widow was particularly difficult because there was no welfare state with a system of prescribed benefits. The wellbeing and financial security of women was often reliant on their husband or other men providing what they needed. Widows were especially vulnerable to being physically assaulted, ostracized from society, and preyed on by those who could take advantage of them.

The theory of evolution is based on the concept of ‘survival of the fittest’ (a term made famous by Charles Darwin in his 5th edition of ‘On the origin of species’). A different, but related, concept is ‘might is right’ – those with power win out over those who are weaker. In stark contrast to this is God’s particular care for the weaker and more vulnerable: widows and children, for example: “*I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and will execute justice for the needy*” (Ps 140:12). “*learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause*” (Isa 1:17). “*Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute*” (Prov 82:3). ‘*Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”*’ (Matt 19:14) “*Honor widows who are truly widows*” (1 Tim 5:3).

Jesus saw a poor widow in the Court of the Women. To have gained access to be there she must have been a Jew – a member of the covenant community of Israel. Why was she poor? She was not being adequately provided for, supported and protected as God’s Law prescribed. She might even have been one of those widows who had been preyed on by the ungodly, greedy scribes of whom Jesus had just said they “devour widow’s houses”. She didn’t have much, yet Jesus said that ‘*she, out of her poverty has put in everything she had to live on*’ (v44). It is significant that she gave two mites, two leptas, two of the smallest coins. She could have put in just one, and (if anyone had noticed her) they would not think any the less of her because she was evidently poor. She was like the faithful widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7-16) who gave the last of all she had to provide for the prophet Elijah, herself and her dependent son.

Was it wrong that the rich people coming into the temple treasury put in large sums of money and a poor person only gave a little? No, this reflected the proportional tithing principle for Old Testament Israel. The OT tithe ‘tenth part’ was 10% of a person’s resources given to God (Lev 27:30). An offering was given in addition to the tithe. A tenth of Israel’s seed, fruit, and flocks were given to the Lord (Lev. 27:30–32; Deut. 14:22–24; cf. 2 Chron. 31:5–6; Neh. 13:5, 12). The people gave a tenth to the Levites to support them (Num. 18:21–24; cf. Neh. 10:38; 12:44), and the Levites, in turn, were to give a tenth to the chief priest (Num. 18:25–28). Those who didn’t tithe were threatened with a curse, while those who did tithe were promised blessing (Mal. 3:8–10). Some people assume that the Old Testament Israelites gave just one 10% tithe, but when we add together the multiple required tithes the total percentage given was likely something over 20%.

Some Christians believe that Scripture mandates New Testament believers to give tithes and offerings in the same proportion as the Old Testament Israelites were commanded to do. However this is not accurate for a number of reasons:

* The Old Testament examples of Abraham and Jacob giving a tenth are not normative patterns for us.
* New Testament believers are no longer under the Mosaic covenant (Rom. 6:14–15; 7:5–6; Gal. 3:15–4:7; 2 Cor. 3:4–18).
* The Old Testament tithe and offering system was tied both to the sacrificial system of the old covenant and to a theocratic nation living in the physical land of promise.
* When Christians are instructed in the New Testament to give generously, no mention of tithing is included (e.g. Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–37; 11:27–30; Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8:1–9:15).

However, even though tithing isn’t required today as a Scriptural mandate, it does not follow that believers should hoard their possessions. We are commanded to support those who preach the gospel (Matt. 10:10; Luke 10:7; 1 Cor. 9:6–14; 1 Tim. 5:17–18). While we should enjoy the good things God gives us, we are also called to be generous to those in need (1 Tim. 6:17–19; 2 Cor. 8–9). Wealth can so easily become an idol, leading us to abandon the Lord (1 Tim 6:10). Christian believers are called by God to give generously, freely and sacrificially. For many this will mean giving more than ten percent of your income, time, and other resources to support both word and deed ministries of the church.

Having carefully observed this poor widow giving ‘everything she had’ into the temple treasury, Jesus analyses and judges both her actions and the fate of the magnificent temple building, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The judgement of Christ**

It is possible for people to look good, impressive and attractive on the outside, but be bad on the inside. In his gospel, Matthew records that Jesus said of the Jewish religious leaders“*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness*” (Matt 23:27-28). This matches the warning and judgement of Christ that Mark records:“*Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretence make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation*.” (Mark 12:38-40).

Not only did the individual scribes and Pharisees come under the judgement of Christ, but the whole temple system would be destroyed within a few years of the construction finally been completed in AD 63. This was the destruction predicted by Jesus when he said, ‘*there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down*’ (13:2b). In AD 70 the Roman military commander Titus (who later became Caesar) together with his army laid siege to Jerusalem. Jewish historian Josephus writes that the order was given to demolish the entire city and temple. So it was that the magnificent temple was reduced to rubble, only the retaining walls of the temple mount platform remained. Jesus pronounced divine judgement on the whole temple system, the wicked scribes and pharisees and the grand temple built by Herod the Great as ‘*an everlasting memorial of him*’. Yet, in contrast Jesus highly commended the poor widow. There are important lessons for us in this.

**Firstly**, Jesus noticed the details of the small gift of a poor, vulnerable widow whose two small coins would likely not have made much noise as they descended into the shophar offering box. Brothers, sisters, friends, God sees and notices not only the people of high rank and large stature, but also very much the weak, vulnerable and needy. The Lord notices the smallest details in our actions, words, thoughts and motivations. Nothing, absolutely nothing escapes his careful attention. David praises the Lord for His all-knowing power in Psalm 139:1-3 “*O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways*”.

**Secondly**, God’s evaluation of our willing contributions to the church and the work of the gospel are not mankind’s. Humanly what difference would two of the smallest coins make to a huge temple still under construction and the support of many scribes, pharisees, chief priests, and other temple workers? Humanly, it was barely worth the widow bothering to give so little, but her generous sacrificial gift revealed her humble worshipful heart and that was of immense value to the Lord.

So, when we are materially wealthy and we give substantially more for the work of the church than others, let us be careful not to think that this is more pleasing to the Lord just because of the size of our offering. When we give many more hours of our time serving in the church than others, let us be careful not to think that this is more pleasing to the Lord just because of the greater extent of our labours. Instead, probe your heart for your motivation to give, is it without reluctance or a sense of compulsion, but rather thankful and cheerful as an expression of your love for your Lord and Saviour (2 Cor 9:7)?

Also, when we have very limited capacity to give financially or are time-constrained by many good and necessary commitments which limit how many hours we can serve in the local church, do not despise the smallness of your offering. The Lord welcomes and does not reject the smallest of your material gifts and labours when given with a generous, willing and humble heart of thankfulness.

So, Sunday School children, whilst you are generally smaller and less noticeable at times than the adults in the room here, do not think that because of your size, capabilities, and small material riches, that you cannot generously give to the Lord. Seek to serve with your time and other resources, helping your teachers and fellow students in Sunday School, perhaps being bold and talking to some of the older members of our church who delight to see you here.

**Thirdly**, the Lord commends giving in faith and trusting for God to provide. The widow in the temple that day, like the widow of Zarephath before her, gave generously out of what she had to live on. Her trust in God to provide points to the trust of Jesus in His Heavenly Father – ‘*not my will but yours be done*’ (Luke 22:42). He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8). Jesus gave Himself for people like you and me, 100% of all that He had on this earth.

You see, the Lord Jesus made Himself very small when He took on human flesh, being born as a helpless baby. He was materially very poor on this earth. As he was dying at the cross all he had materially was his clothing that was divided up between four Roman soldiers (John 19:23-24). He gave His life as a ransom for many (Mat 20:28).

He is the One to whom the Jerusalem Temple pointed, unlike that building, He was raised up again and lives today. He is the greatest gift, freely offered to all who will come to Him in repentance and faith. “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich*” (2 Cor 8:9).

AMEN.