

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Blessedness in Two Small Coins

Mark 12:38-44

In the midst of a famine Elijah asked a widow in Zaraphath for a little water to drink and some food to eat. She told him that she was gathering wood to prepare her last morsel of food for her son and herself. After eating it she expected that both of them would die of starvation. Elijah told her not to be afraid, but to trust God, make him a little cake and bring it to him. He promised that she would have enough oil to last until the famine ended. From that story we learn that one model of faithfulness is trusting God enough to give everything away, even your last morsel of food.

By contrast, we recall the sad story of the young man who asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. In that story, Jesus told him to sell everything he had, give it to the poor and to come follow Jesus. However, the young man was unwilling to do that because he was very wealthy. He trusted his wealth more than he trusted in God's goodness. So he went away sorrowful, a model of faithlessness because he wouldn't give it all away.

In today's scripture we see that giving-it-all-away model of faithfulness accented again in the widow who put two coins in the Temple treasury. Jesus was watching as people put their offerings into the treasury. He observed many who were wealthy put in large sums. When he saw a widow put in her last two coins, he called the disciples together to praise her for her generosity. Without criticizing those who gave large gifts, Jesus praised the woman for giving the most costly gift, everything she had. Clearly then, one exceptional Biblical model of faithful living is trusting God enough to give everything away.

Having heard that you might expect me to invite you to give everything you have away as a demonstration of your faithfulness. After all, Jesus, the supreme model of faithfulness, gave everything he had including his life. And to be sure, that biblical model of faithfulness stands before us always. But note again that Jesus does not criticize those who give from their abundance. Two extremes are highlighted. Those who like that young man trust their resources more than they trust God sadly miss out. Those who give everything, like that widow, are highly praised. And those in the middle, who give what they can, are neither condemned nor singled out for praise.

There is a difference between choosing to do something like that of our free will, and choosing to do that as some sort of obligation. That's why Jesus warned his disciples to watch out for the Scribes who were full of themselves, drunk on their own importance, and who devoured widows' houses. Some religious leaders take advantage of faithful people by using that legitimate model of faithfulness in illegitimate ways. You've seen and heard them on television and radio. Maybe you've encountered them in the churches you have attended. Jesus clearly warns against such behavior.

I received a fund-raising letter some years ago. "A young pastor was in financial distress," the letter began. It went on to tell how the young man felt led to give a certain amount of money to the Lord's work. He gave, the letter said, and with joy! But that really left him in a financial bind. Not to worry! The next day someone gave him seven times what he'd given away. Seven times! Coincidentally, it was exactly the amount of money the young pastor and his wife needed to keep their home.

A Christian accountant, wrote in his book, “You know, when I get down to the end of the month, and I’m \$20 short of being able to pay my bills, I give God another \$30 . . . and God provides. He just brings in the money. . . Tithing always works when we are faithful”¹ So it goes. Give and you shall receive. No risk. Satisfaction guaranteed. They even quote the prophet Malachi who says, “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

Now maybe those are true stories. I certainly have no basis for questioning their veracity. But you and I both know that it’s one thing to tell a personal story and quite another to imply that God works that way all the time. “God cannot break his own pact,” they say. And that’s the problem.

If God had made such a pact, that little old lady in the Gospel lesson would be positively rolling in dough. Just imagine. After leaving the Temple, she returns home. There she finds that her one-room shack has become a twenty room McMansion complete with servants and a full wine-cellar. After all, if anyone ever gave her last penny to the Lord, that woman did. How easily she could’ve given only one coin. Who could’ve criticized her? But no! Everything she had, she put in the plate. Using the logic of those fund-raisers. She’ll be one rich lady when she gets home.

But we know better. There’s no pot of gold waiting for her. No mansion. No servants. When she gets home, she’ll find the same old empty shelves. Same old poverty. She has nothing. Plenty of nothing. If you take Jesus literally, she doesn’t even have enough to buy bread. She held nothing back. Two coins . . . her life savings! Jesus was impressed by her generosity. Impressed enough to stop what he was doing and point her out to his disciples. You’ll never hear higher praise on his lips. But he makes no promises . . . no promise of financial return, no promise of a reward in heaven. Jesus praises her generosity, her giving. That’s all.

When it comes to money, churches sometimes lay guilt-trips on people. One minister reportedly asked a young boy if he knew where little boys go if they don’t put their money in the offering plate. Imagine that kind of talk! It implies that if you don’t give, something bad will happen. That’s not much different from the promise that if you do give, God will reward you with more. Ah, but that little boy was one smart cookie. He knew exactly how to deal with the pastor’s question. Remember, the pastor asked if the boy knew where boys go if they don’t put their money in the offering plate? “Yes, Pastor,” the boy replied. “They go to the movies.”²

Let’s hear it for a little boy who sees through the deception. Let’s hear it for people who know God well enough to sort out truth from falsehood. Let’s hear it for ministers and elders who raise money for the church honestly and with integrity. Let’s hear it for people like that widow, rich or poor, who give from the heart, whether their gifts are large or small. The good news in this passage is there for all to see. It’s not that those who give everything are better than those who don’t. It’s not that small gifts are better than large. It’s not that poor folk are more generous than rich folk. The good news is that while everybody else was impressed by the big givers, Jesus was impressed by the widow who gave everything. God sees the giver of every gift, whether large or small.

Christ sees things differently than we do. You and I are easily impressed by wealth. May as well admit it. If we’d been with Jesus that day, we’d probably have gawked at the big gifts. And we might have overlooked the small gifts. But Jesus saw all the gifts and their givers. He didn’t overlook anyone. Thank God, that Christ’s ways are not our ways. In God’s economy, the measure of a gift isn’t the amount, but the cost. In Christ’s eyes, the love behind the gift is more important than the size of the gift. That’s not criticism of those who give large gifts. Nor is it praise for those who give small ones. The issues he lifts up are pride, hypocrisy, and abuse of power and position.

¹ Malcolm MacGregor, *Your Money Matters*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1977)

² George Goldtrap, Madison, Tennessee, as told in *More Holy Humor* by Cal and Rose Samra. (Carmel, New York: Guideposts, 1997), 135

So what's the story? When you're \$20 short of being able to pay your bills, should you give another \$30 to God, expecting a big fat bonus? Of course not! When you come to church with nothing smaller than a \$20, should you bypass the offering or drop the \$20 in? If you bypass the offering, will God punish you? No! Truth be told, we've all bypassed the offering plate from time to time. I've been told that on occasion people even make change. What's it to you if they do? What matters is that you give from the heart. There is blessedness in giving, large gift or small. That's no excuse to short-change God by just tossing in a buck or two when you feel like it. After all, the Biblical model of giving is one of total trust in God, giving everything away. But don't be misled by unscrupulous people who imply that you must give away more than you can. And don't feel guilty if you can't give more. The good news is that God takes note even of the small gifts. Give what you believe God is calling you to give. Give in thanksgiving to Christ who gave his life, everything he had, that we might live and live abundantly to the glory of God.