

Small-Group Bible Study for Nov.5-11, 2018

Memory verse:

"Then a poor widow came and dropped in two small coins."

--Mark 12:42

1. **Read Mark 12:38-44.** Where is Jesus and what is he doing (see verse 35)? What does he caution his listeners about?
2. How does he describe them? What is the problem with them? *
3. Have you ever known a religious person like this? What effect has that had on you?
4. What is Jesus' point here, do you think?
5. How might this correlate to the story of the widow?
6. What does he notice about the widow? Does he admire her, is he worried about her or? **
7. Is Jesus suggesting that we give everything we have to the church? If not, what is he suggesting?
8. What parallels, if any, do you see between Jesus and the widow? ***

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, help us to be pure in our faith, so our actions reflect you in every way. Thank you. AMEN.

From the commentators:

John Petty, progressiveinvolvement.com:

"In a society heavily influenced by issues of honor and status, the scribes keep angling for more recognition and higher privilege. Jesus mocks them for it.

*"Apart from their hypocritical and ostentatious display, the scribes also do real damage. They are 'the ones devouring the houses of widows.' When someone died, the lawyers would swoop in and help 'manage' the deceased person's estate. ... Naturally, the scribes would charge a fee for this 'service.'

... "Then Jesus 'sat over against...the treasury.' This treasury was located in the Court of Women. It consisted of 13 flute-shaped chests into which people threw their offerings.

"This was quite an open procedure. Donors would state publicly the amount of their gift and the purpose for which it was given. That such a system might generate some 'showing off' would not be surprising.

"Jesus draws a contrast between the 'many rich' who were 'throwing much' and the one poor 'beggar widow' who threw in two insignificant little coins. (It took somewhere between

four and eight of them to make a penny.) This widow, incidentally, is identified as *ptochoi*—the poorest of the poor, a widow reduced to begging.

... “Note Jesus' three-fold description of the woman's economic condition. ...She gave ‘out of her want, all as she had, her whole life.’

“Jesus does not laud the woman. Contrary to many sermons delivered since which encourage people to this level of sacrificial giving, Jesus does not lift the beggar-widow up as an example, or suggest that anyone ought to emulate her. She is not a positive example, but rather the (barely) living representative of a crying shame. She represents the on-going exploitation of the poor by the Temple elite.”

David Lose, senior pastor, Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minn.:

“How do you hear Jesus’ description of the poor widow’s offering – is it praise or lament? To put it another way: Is Jesus holding up the widow and her offering as an example of great faith and profound stewardship, or is he expressing his remorse that she has given – perhaps feels compelled – to give away the little she has left?

* * “I’ll be honest, for most of my life, I’ve assumed it was the former. But recently I’ve been persuaded that it’s the latter. Here’s why:

- This passage is part of a larger set of passages that focus on Jesus’ confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees and center on his critique of the Temple. Indeed, ever since Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly (in ch. 11), he has done little else except teach in the Temple and debate with the religious leadership there.
- The first verses of this week’s passage condemn the scribes precisely for ‘devouring widow’s houses’ – shorthand for pretty much everything they own.
- In the passage immediately after this one, Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple itself, seemingly the culmination of his attack on the religious establishment of Jerusalem, an attack that has prompted his opponents to seek first his arrest and, eventually, death.
- Notably, there is actually no word of praise in Jesus’ statement about the widow or any indication that Jesus is lifting her up as an example. All he does is describe what she is doing. Which makes how we imagine his tone of voice – praise or lament – so critical.

“All of this leads me to conclude that Jesus isn’t actually lifting her up as an example but rather decrying the circumstances that demand her to make such an offering, a sacrifice that will likely lead to destitution if not death. He is, in short, leveling a devastating critique against Temple practice and those who allow, let alone encourage, this woman to give ‘all she had to live on’ (or, in a more literal translation of the Greek, *her whole life!*).

...“I think the good news of this passage comes in what it says about the God we worship, the God we confess Jesus reveals most clearly. Because this God cares about this woman and her sacrifice. This God sees her plight and recognizes her affliction. This God will not countenance such abuse – even and especially under the guise of religious piety – and so decries those who would order their world and religion to make such sacrifices necessary. God sees her...and God cares about her. ... I doubt anyone else, including the religious elite parading around the Temple that day and dropping in their token offerings, noticed this woman. And I doubt the disciples following Jesus would have noticed her either, had not their Lord lifted her up for their attention and sympathy. Which leads me to conclude that God also

sees our struggles, recognizes our challenges, cares about where we are hard pressed to make ends meet.

“But even more, I think God is inviting us to look around and see each other, those in our community we know and those we don’t. And I mean really see each other – the pain of those who are discriminated against because of their ethnicity, the desolation of those who cannot find work and have been abandoned to fend for themselves, the despair of those who have given up on finding work and have lost hope, the anguish of those who have been exploited by sex traffickers. God is inviting us to see them, to care for them, and to advocate for a system that does not leave anyone behind.”

Emerson Powery, professor of Biblical studies, Messiah College, Grantham, PA:

... “[T]his was more than a story about *faithful* giving. Yes, this widow ‘put in everything she had.’ Yes, this woman, in this act of giving, acts unselfishly (even if unwisely). Yes, this unnamed character did what she thought she needed to do.

“Furthermore, Jesus made the act of giving the point of his teaching. While he may not have concluded the observation by saying, ‘So, should you give all of your possessions,’ he did seem to imply such an idea with his comparison to those who gave only *some* of their abundance. Yet, the story seems to be about more than that. Rather, this was a story...that exposed the religious leaders for their hypocrisy. And, it may just expose us all!

“...Jesus challenged the scribal teaching about the relationship of King David to the figure of the Messiah.

...“His tirade against the scribal class offered a harsh critique of their pride: desiring the best seats at synagogue or greetings of honor in the agora.

...“But the critique (or, slander?) of their practices became more serious, as Jesus questioned their economic policies, cheating widows out of their homes. ... Did the scribes find ways (legitimate or otherwise) to take houses away [from widows]? Or, did travelling scribes use up the resources from widows’ homes?

“Juxtaposed with the scribal class was this widow. She, too, became an example in Jesus’ teaching, a positive object lesson, someone to observe. She was unnamed and Jesus didn’t address her directly.

“...Jesus’ observation about the ‘poor widow’ who sacrificed the only economic resources she had left was a natural progression from Jesus’ critique of scribal abuse of the widows’ homes. ... In light of the context of conflict between Jesus and the temple leaders, this story was more likely a condemnation, rather than a commendation; that is, it highlighted the ways the ‘treasury’ (of the scribes) consumed the means of the poor.

“Of course, despite centuries of interpretation, Jesus did not criticize the Temple directly here. Rather, he challenged the leadership to practice more just ways. Furthermore, his observation about this widow fit the pattern of several prophets who preceded him, in which widows were associated with other vulnerable people, orphans and immigrants (cf. Jeremiah 7:6; Malachi 3:5).

“The widow still gave! Is it possible to understand this story from her perspective? Even while Jesus may be critiquing the financial strains religious leaders and their institutions place upon the impoverished, this widow gave ... out of a sense of obligation, perhaps. Perhaps, out of a sense of hope. In ancient Israel, the ‘poor’ were not required to give; they simply did so

because they believed in the goodness of the institution, the goodness of its leaders, and the need for the religious institution to remain. Perhaps she knew that once she gave it all, she would need to rely on the resources from the religious institution to provide for her. To care for the orphan and the widow, that kind of 'pure religion,' as James would call it, would hopefully touch the minds and hearts of her neighbors in her village when she was in her time of greatest need. And, perhaps Jesus knew that some of the scribes in charge would not carry out their end of the bargain. Yet, he also knew that there were some scribes, like the one in 12:28-34, who agreed with Jesus about the ultimate commands to love. And, perhaps, Jesus knew that this poor widow would be okay."

Karoline Lewis, associate professor of preaching and the Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.:

"Her whole life." That's what she gave, friends. ...Not a portion. Not a tithe. Not a percentage. But her whole living.

"Her whole living? That should be a moment for pause. None of us can give that to the church, or to anyone or anything, for that matter. So we cannot reduce her donation to a percentage or a portion. We cannot rationalize her offering for the sake of dedication to some calculated stewardship campaign. She gave her whole life to God.

"Why? Out of obligation? Respect? Demand? Expectation? Religiosity? Piety? All of the above? She gave her whole life because there were no other options. She gave her whole life because that's what was expected of her. She gave her whole life because her life depended on it. Caught in a system of quid pro quo, trapped in expectations that demanded more from her than she could practically give, knowing that her future depended on her present, she had to do what she did. She acted out of assumptions and assertions and assessments that located her, managed her, and determined her life. There was no other recourse than to give her whole life.

..."[Yet,] if we reduce the widow's giving to our giving to the church, we have missed the point of this story entirely.

***... "We cannot miss that her offering of her life foreshadows Jesus' own act for us. To what extent Jesus points her out, not to give us justification for a stewardship sermon, or to call attention to our own lives of service, but that in her he sees what he must do. Jesus will have to give his whole life, his entire life. He already did, in fact, prior to the cross. He constantly embraced rejection. He consistently accepted the questioning of his followers. He confirmed over and over again that following him would mean whole life giving and whole life living. The widow's example should be nothing new and at the same time should be everything new.

"She embodies Jesus' own ministry. She acts out Jesus' own call. She believes that what she does will manifest itself in something beyond herself. In the end, that is truly discipleship according to Mark ... and it is what Jesus portrays according to Mark. But more so, according to Mark, this is the essence of God.

"God knows nothing else than to give God's whole life. God has shown that time and time again to God's people in the Hebrew Scriptures and we should expect no different now. This is the essence of God—to give God's whole self. And here, now, in this unnamed widow, God is doing it again.

"God calls us to whole life living. That's what discipleship is all about."