

## **“Radical Generosity”**

**Mark 12:38-44**

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most remarkable women in the Bible, and we don't even know her name. What she did that day in the Temple touched Jesus so much he had to point it out to his disciples. Like everyone else in those crowded corridors and courts, the disciples would have overlooked the person who exhibited the highest level of faithfulness, trust and generosity. Jesus made certain that did not happen. Listen as I set the scene for you.

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and spent the early days of Passover teaching in the temple. He knew this was risky because the authorities had been critical of him and wanted to arrest him, but this did not mute his voice. Each day, he exposed the hypocrisy of some of the religious leaders and challenged them to put the people's interests ahead of their own. This is clearly seen in the opening words of our text.

“Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.” (Mark 12: 38-40)

Perhaps Jesus took a break from teaching and confronting the Pharisees when he sat down near the temple treasury, a place in the Court of Women where people gave their freewill offerings and paid their temple taxes. There were thirteen receptacles there, commonly called trumpets because of their shape. Worshipers were expected to put money in all thirteen receptacles because each one represented a portion of the work that went on at the temple that needed to be funded.

One by one, people walked over to the treasury, announced how much money they were contributing and placed their coins in the trumpets. You can imagine how much noise the large coins made and how that loud, clanging sound could attract so much attention.

As I mentioned earlier, I am confident no one noticed the obscure widow mentioned in our text or the tiny amount she contributed. After all, she had only two coins to give, and they were the smallest coins minted, each worth just a fraction of a penny.

Who would hear these tiny coins as they slid down those large trumpets? No one, and had Jesus not been close enough to see her do this, he would have missed it, too.

So moved was Jesus, however, by what he witnessed that he gathered his disciples around him to tell them what happened. To their surprise, Jesus declared this anonymous widow the biggest contributor of the day.

“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.” (Mark 12: 43-44)

Like many of you, I have read and studied this text several times. Last week, as I pondered it once again, three questions emerged that helped me see it from a fresh perspective.

*Why did this widow do this? Why did Jesus single her out? Why did Mark share this story with his readers?* Examine these questions with me for a few minutes.

**Why did this widow give her last two coins that day?** Maybe she was wired to be generous. Some people are, you know. It’s just a part of their DNA.

“That person would give the shirt off their back,” I’ve heard it said about family members and friends. For some people, giving is no struggle. It comes naturally, as it may have for this widow.

She could have given all she had because this was what she was taught. There were thirteen offering containers in the temple, and worshipers were expected to put something in all of them.

She did not have thirteen coins, but she had two. Quietly, she gave both.

If this was the reason she gave, you have to admire her for being obedient and faithful. She wasn’t able to do everything she had been taught to do, but she did what she could.

Perhaps there was a time when she and her husband gave out of their abundance, but no longer could she do this. His death dried up her financial support, and it appears she had no family left to take care of her.

This would not keep her from going to the Temple and giving, though. She would give now out of her poverty and would continue to do so as long as she had anything to give. Her circumstances changed, but not her habits.

Of course, everyone who studies this story wonders why she gave both coins that day. Why not just give one? No one would have faulted her for doing this.

I don't know for sure why she gave all she had. What I know is that Jesus was impressed.

While others were looking at the attention-grabbing scribes, dressed in their long flowing robes while waiting for the next compliment, Jesus looked at the widow whose offerings allowed the scribes to purchase these robes.

“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 she had to live on.’” (Mark 12:43-44)

**Why did Jesus lavish her with praise?** Was it because her two little coins would change the world? No, it was because her heart would!

Jesus was impressed with her faith, obedience, commitment and generosity. It was such a contrast to the greedy, egotistical, power hungry religious leaders she was supporting.

One of the Pharisees primary duties, according to the prophets, was to take care of widows, especially if they had no family to take care of them. Not only were some of the religious leaders ignoring their responsibility to take care of widows, they were making life harder for them by foreclosing on their homes.

Who knows, this lady may have been one they put out on the street. Yet, here she is in the temple giving her last penny to support the work the Pharisees were supposed to do. No wonder her pure heart caught Jesus' attention.

**What kind of impact do you think this had on Jesus?** I think her radical generosity inspired Jesus to give his all and to be faithful to God at all cost. If she could give everything she

had that day, and do it humbly and quietly, then he could follow her example in the days ahead. I think her generosity helped him to be faithful all the way to the cross.

There is a gospel song by the title, “When He Was on the Cross, I Was on His Mind.” Perhaps that is true. I would rather believe, however, when he was on the cross, this poor widow was on his mind. Her simple act of generosity enabled him to give everything he had.

**Why did Mark share this story with his readers?** Like Jesus and the disciples, they were dealing with unscrupulous religious leaders, limited resources and difficult challenges. Living under Nero’s reign of terror was frightening and being treated disrespectfully by some of their religious leaders were discouraging.

Mark knew this, and he knew they needed to be encouraged. Hopefully, this widow’s example would do for them what it did for Jesus. It would inspire them to remain faithful to God, stay engaged, be good stewards and continue their good work.

I think there is another reason this passage contrasting the arrogant religious leaders to this humble, devout widow was included in this gospel, as a friend of mine pointed out to me several years ago. Perhaps this was Mark’s way of reminding his readers that a beautiful angel, like this widow, and an ugly demon, like these religious leaders, live in all of us.

At times we are the widow, humbly carrying out our responsibilities. We are genuine, sincere, compassionate, kind, grateful and generous to a fault. We support those institutions that are trying to make the world better and trust the leaders guiding them. We do our part to strengthen God’s work even when it requires sacrifices, because we believe in God and God’s vision for the world.

There is another side to us, though, and it is not pretty. Just like the scribes, we can be ruthless when it comes to protecting our interests and maintaining a lifestyle to which we have grown accustomed. We, too, are capable of abusing power and hurting others without considering the hardships we inflict upon them. At times, we think life is all about us, manipulating and exploiting others to satisfy our desires.

You would never know it, however, when we come to church. We cover it up well by going through the motions of worship and praise, like the scribes and Pharisees did.

This text reminds me that we are not all bad, but neither are we all good. We truly are a mixture of the good, the bad and the ugly. The ugliness of the scribe and the beauty of the widow reside in all of us.

Which one won that struggle in your life last week? Which one will this week? Whose help do you need to subdue the demon and release the angel?

I need God's help and suspect you do, too. Let me encourage you to draw closer to God and rely upon Him. He wants to help you, and I am confident He will.