

The Generous Life

Luke 21:1-4

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It was one year ago this month that we did a month-long series of messages on money and stewardship entitled *Buried Treasure*. In my introduction I said the following:

I had friends that urged me not to apologize for speaking on money. They were afraid I would cave into what people who love money might think if I should bring the Scriptures to bear upon the subject. Why should a Bible-believing church apologize for talking about any biblical subject? However, I do feel the need to apologize to you this morning. I apologize for not doing this series sooner and more often. I have been here at Bethel for almost nine years and have rarely spoken one message on money. In those nine years, not a day has gone by that every one of us has lived out a theology toward our finances that has either glorified or dishonored God. Over the years I have talked with so many people who struggle to let Jesus be the Lord of their money; some honestly trying and many really not trying. I have counseled people who are carrying insane amounts of debt on their credit cards because they bow at the idol of possessions. Others are making financial decisions that force them to live lifestyles without generosity to God or others. I have talked with Christians who try to justify gambling as legitimate entertainment. All this time, new people were being added to the kingdom of God and added to this church without good teaching on this critical subject. Young people, like wet cement, have been forming financial habits in their lives that may or may not be honoring the Lord. All that time, money was being made and spent every day oftentimes without biblical consideration. So I do begin with an apology. I'm sorry that I have let this go this long. (Buried Treasure series)

I really do feel this to be true and a lacking area in my teaching ministry here over the years. So we did the *Buried Treasure* series for the whole month of February in 2006. One of the highlights was one Sunday we discussed that God owns everything and we are merely stewards of His stuff, and we gave out a couple thousand dollars in \$10 bills to every household in the church and challenged you to make the most for the kingdom of God with that \$10. We got so many amazing stories of how God multiplied the \$10 into \$100, even a thousand dollars and was given to missionaries, ministries, and neighbors in need. One guy told me it was the heaviest \$10 he'd ever had in his billfold. What was the point? We need to look at every dollar God gives us the same way we all held that \$10. They are all "heavy" because they are all God's. God seemed to really bless that series in many lives here. It's been a year and it's my intention to do a message or two every February to keep these truths before us.

It is my personal experience and pastoral observation that of all the categories of life that Christians must submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, money, and the love of money, and the things that money provides seem to be the most difficult. Churches are filled with people who look in the mirror and spiritually self-evaluate and they think, *Have I cheated on my spouse? No, I'm good with God. Have I read my Bible this week? Yes, I'm good. Have I been regular at church? Yes, I'm good. Have I cussed, lied, cheated, lusted? A little, but I've asked forgiveness. Anything else, God?* They do everything else they think the Christian life calls for except honor God with their money and they think that everything's good with God. Yet, what does God think?

Can you imagine if God were sitting here today and as each offering was given, God gave His assessment: Nodding His head yes as you put your money in the offering plate or shaking His head, no? *God wouldn't do that! He doesn't care that much about it!* Actually, not only does He care, He did exactly this kind of evaluation during an offering at the temple one day. It's our text today; Luke 21.

Jesus has been teaching at the temple. A few days earlier He had turned over the money changers' tables, driving out those who had turned the temple into a "den of robbers" (19:46). Since then, He had been teaching, telling parables, answering the toughest questions the religious leaders could ask Him (taxes, marriage, the resurrection). Then He turns the tables on His detractors and says about them, *"Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."* (Luke 20:46-47)

We could spend our whole time right here. What is Jesus condemning? Showy religion—their robes, their status. They sought the praise of men. But what were they really like? They "devoured widow's houses," meaning that they took advantage of the widow for financial gain. I think He says this because this is about as bad as it gets. As we saw in James, how you treat people that have nothing to offer you is the real test of your faith. The Pharisees' personal religion was entirely a sham and a show and Jesus knew their hypocrisy. Luke arranges his gospel in such a way that there could be no greater contrast to the showy religion of the Pharisees than what we find in 21:1. This is one of the shortest, but most beloved stories in the Bible.

The Context of the Gift

As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. (Luke 21:1)

This little drama took place in the Temple. This was known as Herod's Temple, actually the third temple, built there after Solomon's and Cyrus'. It took 40 years to build it on the most coveted acres on the planet and it was in the news even this week. Herod's temple was a massive structure.

There was an open courtyard known as the Women's Court. Here the Jews would come to offer their worship including sacrifices and offerings. Around the outside of this area were 13 boxes shaped like trumpets. These were the offering boxes where worshippers would give their tithes and offerings. The Law of Moses had strict commands regarding gifts to God. These were known as *tithes*. A tithe was a gift of at least a tenth of their income. Abraham was the first to offer tithes to God and this concept of giving a tenth became a baseline for giving in the Old Testament. In addition to this were the other offerings that were given for various reasons and helped to provide for the operations of the temple.

How important were the tithes in Israel? The people's eagerness to give back to God has always been an indicator of spiritual vitality. When the people were on fire spiritually, giving was generous. One famous example was when Moses was collecting gifts for the construction of the Tabernacle he had to tell the people to stop giving (Exodus 36:6). When the spiritual ebb was low, gifts to God were meager and the people tried to beat the system, for example, by giving their lame and worthless animals for sacrifices to God (Malachi 1:6ff).

In the first century time of Christ, God's people would bring their tithes and offerings to the temple. After a long session of teaching, Jesus takes a seat in this area near where the offerings are being made. From this position, He can see the people giving their gifts. The text says He first notices, "*The rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury.*" What advantage does Jesus have over His disciples as He watches? As the Son of God, He knows every detail of the lives of every person who is giving including how much they give and how much they keep.

It seems apparent that it wasn't just Jesus who knew the rich were giving their large gifts; everyone else did too. How? They didn't have checks or direct deposit back then. The larger the sum, the more coins it took. I remember talking with our missionary Scott Staub about the inflation problem in Romania and how they didn't have denominations of money big enough for some purchases. To buy a refrigerator, you'd have to take suitcase full of money. A car may take a truckload of money. Imagine someone lugging a suitcase full of cash into church and trying to dump it into the offering plate. Everyone around would say, look at this big gift! That's what Jesus sees. Big bags of coins are being dropped in. Mark says they were throwing them in. Why would they throw them? The same reason guys at the gym drop their weights when they're done – it sounds like an impressive amount of weight and everyone around would take notice.

Then the dramatic moment happens.

The Giver of the Gift

He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. (Verse 2)

We've been talking about widows from the book of James. We've noted that widowhood in the first century, particularly if they had no children, was essentially destitution. They didn't inherit millions from life insurance policies. They had no Social Security. If they didn't have children to take care of them, they had no material resources on which to live. That's why Jesus was moved to compassion in Luke 7 for the widow whose only son had died and He raised the son back to life. Without family, widowhood meant destitution.

So in the midst of the crashing of coinage into the thirteen offering boxes, a widow slips into the Court of Women. What do we know about her? Only one thing. She's poor. She's one of the destitute ones. She might have been old, might not have been. But she was poor. This also means she struggled with all other things that go with it. She had no family; she was undoubtedly lonely. She had lost her husband to death, maybe her children, since she was poor. Life had not treated this woman well.

Perhaps you can relate? This woman would be the last person you'd expect to be generous to God. Look at her life. Look what God had brought to her. Widowhood. Possibly losing children to death. Poverty. Anonymity. Loneliness. But she's not bitter towards God. She's not angry at the world. She hasn't given up her faith.

She slips over to one of the boxes and drops in two very small copper coins. These are the famous "widow's mites." Actually, they were two *leptas*. They were the smallest coins of the day and they had very little metal value. It took two *lepta* to make one quadrant. 8 *lepta* to make an *assarion*. 16 *assarion* to make one *denarius*. A *denarius* was a day's wage. Two *lepta* would equal somewhere around a quarter of a cent. She had two of them and she quietly puts *both* into the box. I don't know about you, but if I was the widow, I would reason like this, *I don't have to put both of them in. A 50% tithe of all my assets has got to be enough. After all, I'm just a poor widow and what difference will a quarter of a cent*

really make with all the money everyone else is putting in? I wonder how many of us would have counseled against it. I might have. However, if she had only given one, we wouldn't be talking about her 2,000 years later, would we?

Unlike the Pharisees, her gift was quiet. No pomp. No circumstance. No show. Just a simple, humble gift. Mark's account says that Jesus quickly gathered His disciples around Him. And He makes this pronouncement:

The Value of the Gift

"I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." (Verses 3-4)

Jesus was either really bad at accounting or God's accounting is much different than ours. *She has put in more than all the others.* There's room in the Greek for the meaning to be, she has given more than all the others *combined*.

You wonder if the disciples were used to Jesus making outlandish statements by now. *Okay, Jesus, how can that be? Shock us one more time.* On the surface, this is an irrational statement. He explains, *All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.*

What is He saying? In the economy of God, gifts aren't measured by the face value of the currency. They aren't measured by the value the government places on them. **Gifts are measured, not by how much we give, but by how much we keep.** The measure is the level of sacrifice.

This is why Jesus wasn't impressed by the giving of the wealthy. Did they give large sums? The Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write accurately that they gave large sums. However, it was easy for them to give large sums because they still had so much left to live on. So the gifts were large, but the sacrifice was small. In the widow's case, the gift was small, but the sacrifice was huge. It was the widow who was commended by Jesus, not the rich.

When it comes to the stewardship of our lives and specifically our money, we have to realize that God grades on a curve and the factor in it is how sacrificial the gift is to us personally. David realized this. In 2 Samuel 24 he did a very foolish thing; he counted how many soldiers were in his army. This incensed God because David was glorying in the size of his army instead of trusting in God. Long story short, God sent a plague through an angel and thousands died. At one particular piece of ground in Jerusalem, God stopped the angel bringing the plague. David went to that spot to offer a sacrifice and offered the owner money to buy it. The owner was shocked to see the King and offered to give it to him. David's response is telling of where his heart was,

But the king replied to Araunah, "No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing." (2 Samuel 24:24) If it didn't cost him anything, it didn't really mean anything. Paul writes it this way, *For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.* (2 Corinthians 8:12)

He might have had the widow's gift on his mind. Here he is answering the very common question that people think and ask at times, *How much do I have to give to God (i.e. what's the minimum I can get by with)?* Last year when we worked carefully through the whole

question of the place of the tithe in the New Testament church, I said that the tithe is a redemptive principle that at the very least gives us a place to start. Particularly given our context here as American Christians, the richest Christians who have ever lived. When we get to heaven, even the poorest here will be in the top 10% of the richest Christians who have ever lived.

In this story, we're the wealthy going to the temple. So what does it say when the richest Christians in history are asking what is the bare minimum required to make God happy?

We are asking entirely the wrong questions. The real question the widow beats us over the head with is this, *What is sacrificial giving for rich American Christians?* I cannot tell you as your pastor that if you give 10% to God, that God's happy with you or guarantee that you're going to get to heaven and find out that you laid up treasure there. If I was speaking in Sierra Leone or Haiti I might be more comfortable saying that. Not in Suburban America.

That's why I don't like answering that question with a percentage. Another quote from the series: ***Do I believe that tithing as a rule from God is in effect? Yes and no. Tithing as a redemptive principle gives us a baseline for beginning, not ending, our giving. Tithing is simply a starting point. In our context, do I believe that if you are not giving 10% that you are robbing God? Yes. Unless you are under some extraordinary circumstance, most of us should be giving more. However, just because you give 10% doesn't mean that you are pleasing God either. If you don't make it a rule, people who love money don't start there. If you make it a rule, legalists stop there.*** (Buried Treasure series)

Why is this true? Because the widow teaches us gifts to God aren't measured by how much we give, but by how much we keep.

I was talking with someone recently who said that she really liked Oprah. I said, "Really, why?"

She said, "She's so generous with her money."

I said, "Like what, the cars she gave away?"

"Yes."

I said, "Those didn't cost her anything; they were given to the show by the car company."

"What about her school?"

I said, "She spent a lot there, \$40 million; but let's do the math on what \$43 million is to her when she's worth over a billion dollars." You see where that was going. What is generosity? How do we define it? How does God define it? We too often want to define by what is given. God defines it by what is kept and the sacrifice that was required of the giver.

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc. is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them. (C.S. Lewis)

Lewis asks an intriguing question. What lifestyle changes have our giving to and for God produced? We all have to ask that question. One thing that last year's series did in my life was to take a look at the big picture for me personally. One thing I have changed is my will. My old will didn't look like a man wanting to invest for eternity. I breathed a little sigh of relief when I had signed the papers. I feel more prepared to give an account for it now. All of us have to look at our circumstances and say, *How can I be rich towards heaven?* Jesus'

words are heavy: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* (Matthew 6:19-21)

That is a pressure I feel as your teaching pastor. There are a couple thousand souls here that are shaping their lives and eternity around what is taught from this pulpit. I don't want to get to heaven and find out that because I was afraid of the subject of money, you never realized that what you do with your money here will impact your treasure there. I don't want you to come up to me in heaven and say, *Why didn't you tell me? I could have done so much more if only I would have realized it.* Loved ones, I want each of you to enter glory and to receive the reward that God promises when we are generous to Him in this life. We don't get to keep it, but by giving it away, we can send it ahead.

It would be great if most of us get there and can say, *I'm so glad I was a wise steward of what God gave me!* Stewardship goes beyond money to time and gifts, but I don't find those to be strongholds in most Christians. Most Christians are glad to give time to the Lord, glad to use their gifts for God; it's just when it comes to money, that we get tense and shaky and sweaty and it seems to be so hard to give it away.

Then we read about the poor widow. Who isn't humbled by the two coins the widow gave? I am. It didn't seem like much, but this is how God works. Those two coins have generated literally billions of dollars for the kingdom of God through the years as rich and poor see in her an example to aspire to. She won't be hard to find in heaven. The destitute widow will be one of the richest people there. The real question is, *Will you?*

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