

Mark 12:28-34, 38-44 (NRSV)

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³²Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

³⁸As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

You want to know what love is? It is a matter of the heart. Meet this widow who gives from the heart, for that is all she has. She knows that love matters.

Contrasts

The setting is important to appreciating today’s scripture passage. Jesus has entered Jerusalem to waving palms. He has wept over the city, knowing where things are headed. He has been to the temple, where, invoking the words and actions of Jeremiah, he has pronounced warnings against the temple, the nation, and all those who refuse to embrace Jesus and the path that he has laid before them. In response to all this, groups have come forward to trap Jesus in a mistake. The Pharisees have tried to trap him over the question of taxes. The Sadducees have tried to trap him over the question of the resurrection. Others have tried to use David’s words against him. Now, a crowd is gathered around Jesus and his disciples as they sit in the temple courtyard. The stakes could not be higher.

Perhaps a little melodramatically, Jesus raises his voice so that everyone can hear him. He is ostensibly teaching his disciples but he wants to make sure that no one misses a thing! Jesus draws the crowd’s attention to scribes walking through the temple. How they love to walk around so that all can see their importance. How they love the best seats, the places of honor, the deferential greetings – all as they consume the property of widows. One could hardly paint a more compelling picture of the worst in human pride and greed. And all this is directed at the scribes, those the crowd sees as the learned spiritual leaders of Israel! And it is in stark contrast to one scribe, who seemed to hear Jesus clearly and understand much about the nature of God’s kingdom.

Then Jesus draws the crowd’s attention to the chests in which visitors could place their temple offerings.¹ The rich were stopping by to drop in their gifts and Luke is clear that these are non-obligatory contributions. But Jesus points the listening crowd to a woman, a poor widow,² who drops two “lepta” in one of the chests. A lepta was the smallest value

¹Josephus, writer of a late first-century Jewish history, reports that there were thirteen collection chests located in the Court of the Women in the temple courtyards. Each chest was designated for a different use.

²Widows were at the bottom of the social ladder and epitomized the needy. Under the Law of Moses, the Jews were obligated to look after the needs of widows and orphans.

coin, equivalent to about 1/128th of the average daily wage! In a pointed comment, Jesus says that the rich gave out of their “left-overs” (from J. Nolland’s translation), whereas the widow dropped in all that she had. In contrast to the gifts of the rich, the widow has made hers out of a passionate and wholehearted commitment. For her, it was a matter of love pointedly expressed in how she used the little money she had.

Scribes?

There are various groups that swirl through and around the Gospel accounts, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, scribes, and more. Who were these groups? Specifically, in today’s passage who were the scribes Jesus refers to?

In a general sense, a scribe was simply someone who could read and write. That doesn’t seem like much in our culture, but in the ancient world such people were pretty rare. In Jesus’ day, perhaps less than 10-15% of people were literate and many of those were barely so. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that scribal classes developed in ancient cultures. Scribes came to be those who were able to gain the skills and learning needed to build a career around their literacy.

Scribes were the educated intelligentsia and were widely respected for their learning. This would be especially true among the Jews who cherished the Word of God contained in the written Hebrew scrolls. For example, Ezra the scribe was sent by the Persian king to guide and instruct the inhabitants of Judea after the Babylonian exile. Ezra was an official in the Persian Empire and educated in the laws and customs of Israel (see Ezra 7).

The Jewish scribes in Jesus’ day were leaders in the community and were often wealthy. They were easily susceptible to the twin temptations of pride and greed. Of course, who among us is immune to these temptations? There are many warnings to the early Christian leaders as well (Acts 4:32-5:11; 20:33-35; Romans 16:18; Philippians 3:19; 1 Peter 5:2-3; 2 Peter 2:3).

A growing heart

Everyone grows into somebody. The only question is what sort of somebody. In the temple courtyard, Jesus draws a stark contrast. On the one hand, the scribes have allowed their many talents and their successes to grab hold of their hearts, turning them inward. They live for the trappings and privileges of the elite, perhaps blind to the harm they do. Indeed, at best, they have grown to be morally and spiritually blind; at worst, they have grown to be calculating exploiters of the weak.

We know nothing of the widow’s life, but we do know that she has grown to have a heart that is passionately devoted to God’s cause. She is destitute in a way that you and I can’t imagine. There is no Social Security or Medicare. All she has is a couple of nearly worthless coins, yet she offers them to God. There is no reason to think she is a fool. She must know that her two lepta will make zero difference to the temple. But she knows that she gives not based upon what the temple needs, nor even what God needs, but out of her own need, her own faithful heart’s need to give generously. It is her heart that matters, not her household budget. For her, it is a matter of love and Jesus knows that out of love, she has given far more than all the rich people lined up at the chests.

Love matters

Is money really the point here? Of course not. Jesus is contrasting the hearts of the scribes and the rich with the heart of this lone widow. But Jesus also knows, as the crowd knows, that how people handle their money is a concrete expression of what they most value, where their hearts are. And there could be no more concrete demonstration of a committed, outwardly-focused heart than the widow dropping in the two nearly worthless coins. It is the concrete expression of her love for God, a love that encompasses her heart, mind, soul, and strength.

The scribes grew to be people focused inwardly, focused upon themselves. The rich gave only token gifts, ensuring that their own social status would stay intact.³ But the widow – despite her hardships -

- gave no concern to herself, but gave all she had for the benefit of others. This ought to remind us that none of us have been saved solely for our own benefit. We have been restored to a right relationship with God so that we may extend God’s mercy and caring to others. We are to love God and love neighbor. Do we? How would someone know?

As believers striving to be evermore Christlike, we always have to remind ourselves of where our lives should be centered, particularly in these anxiety-ridden times. That center is to be our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the incarnation of God’s love. Nothing matters more.

³In the Mediterranean cultures, the principal use for wealth was to acquire and maintain social status.

Stewardship or Trusteeship?

Often, when we speak of our responsibilities of what God has entrusted to us, we speak of our “stewardship.” In a sense, we are entrusted with caring for God’s household, his family. In Greek, the word for house is *oikos* and the person who oversees the house, who manages it, is called an *oikonomos*.¹ This word is used ten times in the New Testament and is translated variously (based on the context) as steward, or manager, or treasurer in the NRSV¹. Jesus tells a parable about a bad steward (Luke 16: 1-13). This is the story of a trusted steward who squanders the property of his master, which was a particularly despicable crime in Jesus’ day. The moral of the story is something like this: use what you possess to serve people because everything you have was given you by God!

When writing to a congregation he founded in Corinth, Greece, Paul referred to himself as “a servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God,” and as a steward, was required to be “trustworthy” (1 Cor 4:1-2). Peter reminds us that we, the people of God, are to be “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). Clearly, Paul and Peter knew that their responsibilities to God extended far beyond their possessions.

But, Leonard Sweet suggests that “steward” is probably not the best way to think about this. After all, he notes, who really uses the word anymore, other than to refer to someone you might meet on a cruise ship!

Instead, Sweet suggests that “trustee” is more meaningful for us and would be a better translation of the Greek. Many of us have some experience with trusts and the responsibilities held by trustees, even if it is simply some sort of family estate. When we think of ourselves as God’s trustees, the message of the Bible becomes a little clearer. We are given dominion over God’s creation, not so we can rule as a tough or selfish taskmaster, but so we can be effective trustees of God’s wealth, managing it wisely, helping it to grow and flourish. God’s creation is not ours, we don’t own it; rather, we hold it in trust. In a similar way, we hold the Christian faith in trust and we are charged with guarding what has been entrusted to us (1 Timothy 6:20). We, God’s people, the body of Christ, the church, have received a treasure, a trust, given by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14). This treasure is the truth about God and the proclamation that Jesus is Lord!

Understanding our responsibilities as being those of a trustee turns all stewardship campaigns on their heads. I’ve been in many Sunday school classes and when stewardship time rolls around, we always ended up talking about tithing. Pretty soon, somebody would ask the inevitable question – do we tithe on pre-tax or after-tax income! But this is all backwards. It assumes that all the stuff and money we have is ours and the challenge is to figure out how much we want or need to give to God. Do I give 1%, 2%, 5%, or even 10%? Tithing is a long tradition in the Christian church, but it has always been more talk than tithe! We could spend a lot of time talking about tithing in this background study, but we’re not. You see, tithing is not the approach of the truly faithful trustee. Trustees of God’s household recognize that everything we have – all the money, cars, houses, stuff – is a gift from God. We use what we need and then grow the rest for God. Do we need to keep for own use 80% of what God entrusts to us? 85%? 90%?

John Wesley understood this. When he was a young man he made 30 pounds a year. He figured out that he needed 28 British pounds a year to live on and gave two pounds to the church. When his income increased to 50 pounds, he kept 28 and gave 22. When he made 100 pounds a year, he kept 28 and gave 72. Let those who have ears, hear!

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Monday, Exodus 35:4-29 The Israelite men and women gather to contribute materials needed to construct the tabernacle, the moveable dwelling place of God.

Tuesday, Hebrews 12:1-13 The value of difficult times (trials) in growing to a mature righteousness.

Wednesday, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 Paul commends poor congregations who have given generously to an offering that Paul has collected for the poor in Jerusalem.

Thursday, Luke 12:13-21 Jesus tells a parable about a man who has grown to be a rich fool.

Friday, Acts 4:36-37; Acts 11:27-30 Examples of generosity among the early Christians.

Saturday, Romans 15:25-28; Philippians 4:10-19 Some more examples of the believers’ generosity.

Sermon Notes

Our Family Tree: The Stories of the Christian Denominations

A new series in Scott Engle's 11:00 class on Sunday mornings in Festival Hall. This has always been a much-requested series and is the first time it has been offered.

Today: *John Wesley and the Growth of Wesleyanism*

Next Week: *Vatican II and today's Roman Catholic Church*

All the Sermon Background Studies (now more than 350) can be found at www.thebibleacademy.com.

They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The story of the widow and her coins is often referred to as the story of the "Widow's Mite." It is very popular during annual stewardship campaigns. A person could be excused for thinking that perhaps Jesus told this brief story for the express purpose of helping pastors talk about money!

I've read countless articles and letters from pastors expressing how much they dread this time of year. Indeed, if you prowl the web for awhile you can find entire compilations of their expressed anxieties. One pastor recently wrote, "Yet it never fails: the Sundays I preach on money, someone tells me, "I've been working on a friend for a long time, and he finally came this morning when you preached on money. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get him back, and it's your fault." For my own part I used to ask questions like, "Do you really need more money?" or "How can you possibly expect me to do more?" But this was before I came to realize that I had this all backwards. The question is not how much of our hard-earned money Patti and I will give, it is how much we will keep. The widow provided the answer to that question.

- You might discuss this change in orientation. What is involved in making the change? What are its implications? Where we would begin? Where do you think such a change would lead you?

The story of the widow is not about money, it is a story of the heart. The hearts of the scribes and the rich had turned inward. But the widow's heart was consumed with her love of God and neighbor. Spend some time discussing this story. Feel free to use your imagination! What sort of person do you imagine the widow to have been?