



## Mark 12:41-44

### The Widow's Mite

In graduate school, I thoroughly enjoyed my advanced social psychology courses. It's the field where you study specific observable behavior and draw hypothesis from those observations. Social psychologists study the functioning of groups. Small groups such as families, committees, students groups, churches, or groups of factory workers are excellent for such studies. Psychologists gather data on matters such as the relative effectiveness of groups and individuals within the groups at accomplishing specific tasks, the different forms of group leadership, and conformity to standards set by the group.

Researchers examine the dynamics of large social organizations, such as an army, a church, denomination or the labor force at a factory. They determine such matters as communication procedures within the organization, decision making and other forms of power, control, freedom and the interaction of different influences on members' behavior. Contemporary research, especially in industrial relations, has considered how the structure of an organization can be changed and what the effects of such changes are likely to be.

Let's become amateur social psychologist for a few moments. The first thing we want to do is to observe an area of interest. We want to spend some time just watching, observing and taking notes. We want to collect our data.

At the beginning of our worship service today we asked to you keenly observe the behavior in this auditorium. We asked you to watch those who are involved in the prayers, music, instrumentalists, offering, etc. We have also been watching one another and our reactions to various modes of worship.

Based upon what has been observed for the last thirty minutes we can draw up a working hypothesis. It should be kept in mind that a hypothesis is to be kept open and will change as more data is received. Often, we make decisions and are critical of those in positions because we do not have all the information. We don't have the total picture. Our knowledge of a situation is limited.

In my observation of this group of people between eleven and eleven thirty my hypotheses is they are enjoying singing Christian hymns, and are enthusiastic about what the LORD God is doing in their lives. They believe God answers prayer, and are excited about the fact that He wants to be the Lord and Master of their lives. There is a contagious spirit that moves through this group of people. I think they are vitally involved in worshipping God. This could possibly be a group of people ready for God to invite them to come and join Him in the work He is doing.

In Mark chapter twelve and Luke twenty one we find Jesus keenly observing the behavior of people as they come and go through the Women's Court in the Temple at Jerusalem. It has been a very taxing day. A "great crowd enjoyed listening to Him" (v. 37). At the same time, He has confronted the hypocritical attitudes of the

crowd enjoyed listening to Him" (v. 37). At the same time, He has confronted the hypocritical attitudes of the Pharisees, and all day long has been interrogated by the scribal lawyers. One after another they have come confronting Jesus in the Temple as He was teaching. It was a day of open hostility. The Pharisees and Herodians have tried to "trap Him in a statement" (Mark 12:13), and the Sadducees have tried to trick Him up on the doctrine of the resurrection and after life. It had been a challenging day.

## **AN OBSERVATION BY JESUS**

How did Jesus handle the criticism, the antagonism and the hypocrisy of the religious leaders? What can we learn from observing His behavior and listening to His responses in this situation?

*Let's use our observation skills on a few verses of Scripture.*

Jesus had been teaching in the Court of the Gentiles, and had passed within the lower marble wall that fenced off the inner precinct of the Temple from the Gentiles. Jesus entered the Court of the Women where He could see the 13 *shopharoth*, trumpet shaped chests, or collection boxes for the tithes and offerings. They were located in the area where worshipers could easily place their gifts as they were coming and going. These collection boxes were placed at intervals around the walls, each one was lettered to indicate which offerings were to be placed in them. The colonnade was called The Treasury. It is a vast space where 15,000 worshipers could easily be accommodated.

Jesus seated Himself so He could observe people's behavior in the Women's Court. He sat watching, "*how* the multitude cast money into the treasury" (v. 41). Williams' translation gives us the idea that Jesus "sat down in front of the collection box" and "observed" the people coming and going. He repeatedly watched the different persons who passed by and how they "dropped their money into the chest" (NEB). They "were repeatedly casting their money into the treasury." "Many rich people were throwing in large sums." I am sure if we were there we could hear the loud clanging of the silver and gold coins as they clattered inside the brass trumpet collection boxes.

We see a woman and Jesus. The woman is nameless. We have no record of any word she uttered. As far as we know our Lord did not speak to her. Most likely, she never knew what Jesus said concerning her. She simply passed along with the crowd, carefully placed her two mites into the horn shaped vessel and passed on by out the women's courts, not saying a word to anyone. She went her way in abject poverty and loneliness. The word for "poor" is *ptochos*, and describes abject poverty of a pauper rather than a poor peasant. She is in real danger of imminent starvation. What Jesus has to say is to His disciples, apparently semi-privately because He called His disciples to Himself to say what He had to say.

Frances Ridley Havergale caught the heart of this event with the words in his hymn:

his hymn:

Take my silver and my gold,  
Not a mite would I withhold.

Mark tells us in 12:41; Jesus "beheld" the people casting in their money. The verb is in the imperfect tense, and suggests not a passing glance, but careful watching. Jesus began carefully observing their behavior. He was taking careful note of specific, observable behavior.

The time was late on the same day in which He had been confronted with the criticism of the clever, cynical religious leaders.

### *It's "show and tell" time.*

"He beheld how they cast into the treasury" (v. 41).

Certainly there is a link between the final denunciation of hypocrisy in the rulers and the thoughts of the watching Jesus.

The rich were casting "large sums" into the collection vessels. In the original language it is literally "many," i.e., handful of coins (v. 41). The nominal religion was full of pomp and show.

Jesus saw one lonely woman coming in the crowd, and carefully placed two very small coins (v. 42). The *lepton* was the smallest Jewish copper coin. It was worth maybe an eighth of a cent. She was poverty-stricken. The word "poor" is in the emphatic position in the original. It was "all her living." It was her livelihood. It was all she had. The woman had nothing else at the moment upon which to depend for her very existence. There were no Certificate of Deposit's stashed away in the bank, no Social Security, no IRA's, 401K's, etc. The last two coins she possessed were of the smallest currency value. The woman was in abject poverty. She laid these two copper coins in the collection box.

Jesus seated Himself so he could watch "*how* the multitude cast money into the treasury" (v. 41).

He was not so much concerned with what they gave as with *how* they gave it. Jesus saw the attitude of the soul. He was observing the spirit of the giving.

The rich people were giving their leftovers! She gave sacrificially of everything she had.

## **INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA**

### *Who gave the most?*

On God's scales, the woman's gift outweighed the rest. Jesus said she had cast in more than they all did. That is more than saying she had given more than anyone else that day (v. 43). Jesus called His disciples over to Him and said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on" (vv. 43-44).

In the assessment of Jesus these two small copper coins were like two sparkling eternal large carat diamonds.

In the assessment of Jesus these two small copper coins were like two sparkling eternal large carat diamonds. On eternal scales they outweighed all the rest in the treasury. They were an eternal weight of glory in God's eyes.

This widow's gift amounted to more in the balances of heaven than all that had been put in by the whole crowd. Those two very tiny coins outweighed all the rest. The rich people gave out of their abundance. She gave out of her insufficiency. They gave out of surplus; she gave out of need. Literally, she gave "her whole livelihood." It has the idea of "the means by which life is sustained." The widow gave out of true devotion to God. God was the only one who saw her as she placed her tiny coins in the vessel.

It is not how much we give to God, but how much we hold on to for ourselves. Have we given Him our all?

### *The principle behind the gift.*

The principle behind her giving was the fact that she endured "as seeing Him Who is invisible." The only thing that counts with God is faith. This little widow was rich in faith in God.

Her behavior revealed her faith in God. She knew that God owned it all. He was the creator and redeemer. She knew he would not fail her. He was going to sacrifice everything for her! Before the week was over He was going to give up His most precious possession in heaven for her. He will provide for all her needs. Her vision of God, her faith in Him, demanded that she devote all to Him.

It is a walk of faith. No provision was made for tomorrow. Human wisdom would have declared she certainly under these conditions had better keep everything she had. She might starve to death if she gives these last two small coins to God. She kept nothing, but gave all she had. As the Macedonians she first gave herself to the Lord (cf. 2 Cor. 8:5). The rich religious leaders gave generous contributions, but she gave a true sacrifice to the Lord.

### *Jesus is still watching today.*

Hebrews 4:13 says, "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." (Cf. 2 Chron. 16:9; Prov. 15:3)

When we give sacrificially we are giving based upon God's abundant grace. He observes our giving in proportion to our means. Grace giving is always sacrificial giving. It is based upon the great sacrifice God made in sending Jesus as our substitute on the cross. "For we know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

When we give even very small gifts from the heart we are giving gifts of infinite value. The Lord observes the motive that prompts our giving. Remember the tragic results of deceit in the life of Ananias and Sapphira who sold their property and kept back some of their profit for themselves? The apostle Peter said to Ananias, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained not sold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but God." Ananias fell down and breathed his last as Peter was saying these words (Acts 5:1-6). Young men in the church took him out and buried him. His wife came in a little while later and the same kind of discipline took place again. A "great fear came upon the whole church" when they took her out and likewise buried her (5:7-11).

When we receive greater knowledge and opportunities for service there comes with it greater responsibility.

### *Grace Stewardship is More than Money.*

There is more than money involved in this picture of Jesus and the woman in the Temple. It is a principle of life. It is the very heart of stewardship based on grace. All I am is His. As a redeemed person God owns it all. There is nothing in my life that does not first belong to Him. "You have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God with your body" (2 Corinthians 6:20). Earlier Jesus told the Corinthians, "you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God" (3:23). You belong to God! If you are owned by Christ, that means your body, your mind, your time, your will, your talent and your material assets all belong to Christ. You belong to another and you own nothing. God owns it all.

The rich had given much, but it really cost them nothing for it was merely the "overflow" of their lavish accounts. The woman's gift cost her everything —"her whole livelihood" (v. 44). This lesson of Christ is vitally significant for us. God measures our giving not by how much we give, but by how much we have left over after we give! Grace giving is sacrificial giving. It is giving until it hurts.

The giving that catches God's eye is not necessarily great in amount but in percentage. In the early days of his business, J. C. Penney tithed 10% of all his income. As the years increased, so did his percentage of giving so that by the time he died, he was giving 90% of all his earnings to the Lord's work.

Sacrificial giving has a kind of recklessness about it. It holds nothing back. It has learned to give as God gave to us. The greatest example is His Son (Phil. 2:5-8).

This attitude toward grace giving is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It bids us come and surrender to Christ and trust Him with every need, every care, and every provision in life. It is total absolute trust in Him. My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

Our day is no different than in Jesus' day. Jesus warned against the craving to be somebody. The religious leaders wanted to be prominent, honored and wealthy. They lived for appearance, performance and status in life. Jesus rebuked their sham. He condemned religion for profit and gain. He was opposed to what you can do for me, and what can I get out of it religion. Going to church is often like going to Marti Gras, "Throw me something mister!" "Throw me something mister!"

It has never entered most of our minds what God can do with us if we choose to surrender ourselves unreservedly to Him. Are you willing to abandon yourself to Him?

Robert Arthington of Leeds, a Cambridge graduate, lived in a single room, cooked his own meals and gave to foreign missions over approximately 2.5 million dollars. He wrote this, "Gladly would I make the floor my bed, a box my chair, and another box my table, rather than that men should perish for want of the knowledge of Christ."

The man or woman who deeply desires to please the Lord will evidence this true spirituality by sacrificial giving, for their attitude will be the same as David's, ". . . nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing" (2 Sam 24:24).

That's grace living and grace giving.

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The writer Thomas Carlyle dearly loved his wife. She was also his secretary. However, Carlyle was thoughtlessly absorbed with his personal and professional interests, and treated his wife as if she were still his employee.

Mrs. Carlyle was confined to her bed for many months during a long terminal illness. After the funeral, Carlyle went back to the empty lonely house. Grieving deeply he wandered around aimlessly downstairs in the house, engrossed in his thoughts about the woman he so loved. He went upstairs to her bedroom and sat in a chair beside her bed. Thoughts flooded his heart as he sat reflecting on the fact that he hadn't been there very often during her long illness because he couldn't bear the thought of losing her and it was incredibly difficult bearing his feelings.

Carlyle saw her diary lying near by and picked it up. He never would have read it while she was still alive. He began to leaf through the pages. "Yesterday," she wrote, "he spent an hour with me. And it was like being in heaven. I love him so much." He turned a few more pages and read, "I listened all day to hear his steps in the hallway. And now it's late, I guess he won't come to see me." Carlyle read a few more entries and then threw the book on the floor and ran out into the rain back to the cemetery. He fell on his wife's grave in the mud, sobbing, "If only I had known. . . if only I had known" (Clarence Macartney, *Macartney's Illustrations*).

Oh, my friend. As you travel through life, don't forget to give a few mites along the way. They are precious diamonds laced in gold.

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