

11-8 Mark 12:38-44 Giving What You Have

Who's your favorite people peacock? Who likes to strut those tail feathers; enjoys the adoration of crowds; moves like royalty? It's hard to narrow down. When I think of people who want to be treated like royalty, I think of the red carpet walk at the Academy Awards; or the Yankees at their ticker-tape parade; or Wall St. executives being shuttled by helicopters; or officials riding behind tinted glass in their motorcades. That's today.

In Jesus' day, the real celebrities were the **scribes**. They were lofty religious leaders who usually wore long white linen robes, setting them apart from the common folk who wore fabrics of various and often dull colors. When they walked through the marketplace, people stopped what they were doing and stood respectfully. Only tradesman at work were exempted from showing this respect.

When anyone gave a banquet or feast, they wanted to have a scribe and his pupils in attendance in the same way that having Brad Pitt come to your birthday party would raise your stature. The scribes loved going to these feasts because they were always given the places of honor.

But their desire for deference became a heady wine. They wanted more, so they abused their privileges, unlike our powerful leaders today who always put the interests of others before their own.

As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, 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.'

Scribes were not allowed to be paid for their profession so they lived on subsidies provided by benefactors in much the same way that musicians and artists have lived by the patronage of others for centuries. Not only did wealthy people give them access to riches, but persons of very limited means, such as widows, would also give for their support, even though they had nothing. Taking advantage of those living on the edge of survival is likely the meaning of the phrase, "*they devour widows' houses.*"

We've watched in horror as 11 bodies were recovered in a Cleveland home. They were women who had disappeared in the area over a number of years. A journalist in Cleveland asked the question, would this have happened under the radar if these women were white and upper class? But these were poor and troubled black women. Can it be that poor and vulnerable women are fair game for men who would use them?

Apparently, **Jim and Tami Faye Baker** convinced many trusting but poor souls to support their ministry. Among them were poor folks who lost their savings or their homes. *They devour widows' houses.*

But Jesus didn't tell the widows to stop giving even though there were some bad religious apples. Instead, he observed and celebrated a widow who continued to live by faith rather than fear.

41 He 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.'

What kind of scale was Jesus using when he said that the gift of a penny from this widow was greater than all the others? He gave us the framework when he said, ***From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.***

The scale has long been a symbol of justice. We have all seen the statue or the image on courthouses and in courtrooms: a woman, sometimes wearing a blindfold, holding up the scales of justice. Tell me, in those images, are the scales she's holding balanced or weighted to one side? One pictures equal justice and the other the reality of our tilted world.

Like justice, faithful stewardship is balanced or proportional. Jesus saw people of means giving large gifts to God. As those with wealth gave their offerings, they gave from their abundance and that was what God required of them. Mark says that Jesus and the disciples observed this, but Jesus made no comment about the gifts from the wealthy. He neither lauded nor disparaged their giving because it was expected giving. It's almost certain that Jesus would have rebuked a wealthy person who gave too little.

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded. The balanced life of stewardship puts blessing on one side of the scale and responsibility on the other. The more you have been blessed, the more responsibility you have been given. God calls us to move toward balance between blessing and responsibility.

This is true of wealth and every other blessing we receive. If we have been given a unique ability, then we have an equal responsibility to share that ability. If we are blessed with great intellect, we have an equal responsibility to share that intellect. And to whatever degree we are blessed with wealth, we have an equal responsibility to share that wealth.

This is the balance God expects from us. And that's why this widow's offering was so exceptional. She gave two small copper coins. It was hardly enough to warrant counting. ***She's given more than anyone else***, Jesus said.

If widows in this culture did not have sons or sons in law to provide for them, they were destitute. No social security. No retirement fund. No medical insurance. These widows lived on alms they received from begging. The Greek term translated *poor widow* is not the literal translation. It is a feminine noun that means ***beggar***. Translators know that female beggars were widows without family.

This woman was likely homeless and therefore owned only what she wore and what she could carry. That means those two coins were not what she had with her. They were literally all she had. It was money she would need for basic survival, namely food.

Maybe she had already purchased her daily bread and this is what she had left over. Maybe someone had given her some food. But here she was at the treasury, giving her entire fortune away without any guarantee of bread tomorrow. Could it be that she actually believed that prayer of Jesus about *God giving our daily bread*? Could it be she believed that like her ancestors, she too would be given manna from heaven?

Hers was the greatest gift because it far exceeded her blessing. It was the best gift because it came from exceptional faith.

This is an odd scale that God uses. It doesn't weigh money you receive on one side and money you give on the other. God's scales weigh faith and sacrifice. Jesus is showing us that it's possible to grow beyond the proportional giving that God requires. It's possible that we can give more than we receive. It's possible that we can sacrifice in proportion to the sacrifice of Jesus.

The church I served in Waco started a Hispanic congregation much like we started a Korean congregation here. Except this community of Mexican immigrants was much poorer. All of them worked low-wage jobs. And all of them sent at least 10 percent of their income back to Mexico. They also gave 10% to the church. They couldn't afford this, but they didn't look at it that way.

I noticed something else about these Mexican Baptists. They took care of each other. If someone was short this week, others helped. I've often wondered if our sense of community is weak because we're so independent.

When **Jody Richards** saw a man begging outside a McDonald's restaurant, he bought the man a cheeseburger. Not so odd except that Jody Richards was also homeless. He had \$9.50 from his panhandling for the day. Could it be that those who lack know more about giving than the rest of us?

I have been told by others who run homeless shelters that it is not uncommon for these residents, when they attend worship, to put something in the offering plate. This exceptional faith comes from those who do not have.

We are opening a homeless shelter for women...women who are destitute like the one in this story. There are all kinds of volunteer jobs and I hope you will take one piece of this enormous work. I'm eager to know if like this widow in the Bible, **they give more than they take.**