

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

⁴³ *Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.” (Mark 12:1-44 NIV 2011)*

Should Jesus Really be Watching our Wealth?

I don't know how much you give. Nobody in our leadership knows – not our principal or our president or our church council – nobody, except for the financial secretary. He keeps that information totally confidential. That's why we give you an offering envelope. We Lutherans just feel that's the way it should be. It's really rare in a Lutheran congregation or school to see the kind of thing you often see in a hospital: a wall with bricks that have names on them. Each brick represents a charitable contribution and quite often the bigger the brick, the bigger the gift. But we don't do that here. Why not? We don't want people to give out of pride. We don't want people who are not able to give massive gifts to feel like their offering doesn't matter to God. So our gospel lessons shows Jesus doing something that feels very unlutheran. Mark says, “**Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury.**” Now, they collected their offerings differently than we do. They didn't “pass the plate” during the service. They had 13 trumpet shaped boxes that stood in the walkways that led into the temple courts and people threw in their offerings as they passed by. And no doubt, some people liked it that way. They wanted people to notice how much they were putting in.

Well, Jesus sat down and watched as people threw their offerings in. And he called his disciples' attention to what he saw. We might have thought he would have better things to do. You see, Jesus was going to die in just three days and he knew it. So, what did he do with the precious time that he had left on this earth? He sat down and watched people giving their offerings to the Lord. Does that seem to you like something anybody should be doing? And does it raise a larger question: **should Jesus really be watching our wealth?** Well, remember who this was: the Son of God himself. If anyone had a right to review the giving in the temple, it was Jesus. And, of course, Jesus sitting there, using part of one of his last days on earth to teach this lesson, reminds us that the Judge of all the Earth absolutely does watch our wealth and our offerings. He absolutely does evaluate our stewardship of all the gifts he gives us: our time, our talents, our use of the truth of the gospel and, yes, the treasure – the money – he shares with us. So, the lesson in this reading applies to all of us.

What did Jesus see that day? Mark says, “**Many rich people threw in large amounts.**” That was neither a surprising thing nor a bad thing. If God makes us wealthy, it's only right that we contribute generously to his work. But Jesus did not call our attention to even one of those rich people. Instead, Mark says, “**But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.**” That was the gift Jesus underlined. And Jesus said something that is totally contrary to the way we humans think about it: “**Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.**” Now, how can that be true? If you write a check to Peace today for ten thousand dollars, I guarantee you that your check will be larger than the one my wife wrote for our offering envelope today. When that day ended and the Levites counted the money in those chests, those two copper coins barely registered. In that sense, what Jesus said just wasn't true.

But Jesus wasn't counting whose offering added up to the most. He was counting whose offering cost the giver the most. In that sense, this poor widow had given a king's ransom. Those two small coins were all the money she had. Think about that for just a second. Who would really do such a thing? How much money do you have right now in the bank and in your retirement funds and investments? If you gave to the Lord all that you had to live on, how many thousands or tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars would you personally be giving to God today? Are you prepared to do that?

You know what? God does not ask you to. But when this woman did, Jesus commended her. What made her willing to give such a generous gift? She trusted her Savior. She knew God's promises that he will

always take care of us and he will always out give us. So she gave the tiny amount she had to live on. Why did she trust God like that? If you looked at her life objectively, what evidence was there that God would love her or take care of her? She was a widow. She had nothing and even with those two little coins, she could just barely have bought food for that day. An unbeliever might have mocked her and asked her where God's promises were when her husband died and left her to scrape by day after day. But the Holy Spirit had worked in this woman heart and taught her to know what an unbeliever can't: God loves us even when life hurts. God cares for us and provides for us even when we can't see how it could possibly happen. God never abandons his people even when it looks to all the world like he already has. In a supreme act of trust, she gave all that she had to the Lord.

Do we trust God like she did? If this poor widow were here at Peace today and she was about to put her tiny offering into the collection plate and you or I knew that she was about to give all that she had to live on, all her grocery money, all her rent money and utility money, would we try to talk her out of it? Would we think that her tiny offering wouldn't make a bit of difference for our budgetary problems and think to ourselves that she needed that money way more than the church does? Would we actually try to stop an act of supreme faith like that?

I think we might. And I think that speaks to why our giving on the whole continues to lag behind the ministry we want to undertake here at Peace. That widow gave because she trusted her Lord. Do we? Why are we willing to give thousands and thousands of dollars to our Thrivent Mutual Fund or to our Charles Schwab retirement accounts or to whatever 401k or IRA we have going? Do we trust those financial companies more than we trust God? If so, why? Look at the paperwork for your retirement account. Almost certainly, there's a statement in there somewhere that reads something like this: "past performance is no guarantee of future results." What does that mean? They're not promising you anything. Maybe you'll make money in this investment, maybe you won't. But if you lose it all, don't say they didn't warn you. How different that is from God who promises that he will give beyond our ability to ask or even imagine. God promises that our giving will never hurt us. God promises that he will provide for us all our lives long. Do we trust his promises?

In the end, our congregation's financial problems come down to a question of spiritual maturity. My purpose this morning is not to get you to give all that you have to live on. I have no intention of even asking that. My purpose is to ask all of us to examine our own hearts. All stewardship – all our Christian lives – come down to the question of trust. Do I trust God enough to raise my children the way he tells me to? Do I trust God enough to speak the truth when a lie might make my life easier? Do I trust God enough to go back and ask my wife or my husband for forgiveness when turning everything back on her or him might help me win the argument? Do I trust God enough to sacrifice a generous portion of my time on this earth, of the abilities he has given to me and of the wealth that I earn for the good of his kingdom?

If not, why not? In the end, all sin is the same sin: idolatry. All sin is me worshipping myself and putting what I want, what I feel, what I think I know ahead of what God commands and what God promises. Every one of us is born an idol worshipper and the god we choose to worship over and over again is Me with a capital M. Lack of trust in our Christian life and stewardship is just another example of that same sin. For that sin, we all deserve God's punishment in hell for all eternity.

But Jesus came to rescue us idol worshippers. He was there in the temple of the one true God to worship God and he trusted his Father so perfectly that he lived his whole life as a life of love. He sacrificed all that he had and all that he was for God and for us. He took on flesh so that he could live that life of perfect trust in our place. His life replaces ours in God's record. He laid that life down for us. He suffered hell itself on the cross and then he died to pay for all the idolatry of all our sins all our lives long. He paid for every moment when we were simply too self-absorbed to make any real sacrifice for God. He paid for every moment when we could not bring ourselves to trust God enough to live as he calls us to. Jesus washed all that sin away in his own blood. He rose and we are forgiven. He rose and we will live with him for all eternity.

That God makes promises to us. How do you suppose the story ended for this poor widow? Do you think she went home and starved to death? Mark doesn't tell us the rest of the story, but the whole point is her faith. God promises that he never abandons those who trust in him. Now, she probably never got rich in this life. But God provided for her that day and the next and then one day, probably not too terribly long after this, God took her home to heaven where today she sees Jesus her Savior. The joy she has there is greater than anything she could ever have experienced here.

How did the story end for Jesus? He died and rose and then he ascended into heaven where he sits at the right hand of God and he rules all things for the good of the church. He went there to keep the promises he makes to us. He went there to control all things for your good and my good, to decide how much wealth we will have here. And always he gives us the amount that is best for us. He went there to hear our prayers, to watch over us and be with us every day of our lives here. He went there to bring us home. The truth is, his story isn't done yet. One day he will return and make this world the perfect place he always wanted it to be for you and me.

How will our story end? We will walk the rest of our personal journey here and then we will go home. We will die and go to heaven or Jesus will come back and we'll live in that perfect world. Every day that we walk here, he will be with us. He will protect us from all harm and danger. He will give us all we need for our body and life. He will guide our steps and keep us in the one true faith. And he will grow our faith. He will give us the trust we need to sacrifice for him. My friends, hear his promises. Trust your Savior. And bring a generous offering that truly reflects how he has blessed you. Amen.