

GIVING OUR ALL (Plug into Missions)

Luke 21:1-4 - September 13, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

As many of you know, I recently celebrated my birthday. They did the mass email without me knowing in advance, but I'm deeply grateful for the many people who sent me a card, or a message on Facebook, or an email. It was all very sweet and I am very grateful for each person who reached out, or who privately prayed for me or thought of me. Thank you very much.

It made me think of past birthdays for myself and my loved ones. I remember more than once, especially when I was young, how the birthdays of my brother or mother would sneak up on me, and I would scramble to find a gift at the last minute. I didn't have any money, so if I had time I would make something or draw something, or offer to do a chore or a task for them. For my brother I often tried to give him something I already had but didn't want anymore. They now call that "re-gifting" to make it seem classy, but in fact, it was pretty cheesy way to give a gift without any real sacrifice involved. I remember one occasion when I couldn't think of anything for my Mom, and my eye kept coming back to this resin sculpture of an owl that I had bought for myself, but I really liked that owl and I really didn't want to make that sacrifice or part with it. I kept saying to myself, "*Not the owl,*" but I was racking my brain trying to think of something because I knew my mom would be home soon, and I had nothing to give her.

Finally, I decided to give her the owl, and surprisingly I was almost in tears as I wrapped it up. When she came home I kinda blurted out, "*I love this owl, but I love you even more and I wanted to give you something special to me.*" My mom's heart melted and it became one of her most prized possessions. In fact, she decided to start a collection of owl related things - which was awesome because it made thinking of gifts much easier from that time on, every where I went I would try to find new and different owls to get for her. When she moved into a nursing home 30+ years later, shortly before she passed, she gave the owl back to me, and it sits in our family room every day reminding me of the love we had for one another.

This morning we are going to look at a story about sacrificial giving from Luke 21:1-4. You can find another version of this story in Mark 12. In this account, Jesus drew attention to a woman who gave everything she had as an offering to the Lord and He contrasted it with gifts given by others that involved hardly any sacrifice. As we look at the story we see Jesus commending the widow, but in the larger context we also see Him criticizing the rich and self-righteous religious leaders who gave larger amounts but essentially gave their leftovers. Our goal this morning is to develop a heart for giving that is more like the widow - and then applying that to a invitation to make a special gift for missions by the end of this sermon series.

As we consider this passage we need to recognize that even though the chapter breaks in our Bibles, Luke intends to connect the story of the widow's offering with Jesus' condemnation of the religious leaders at the end of chapter 20. As we see in other gospel passages, Jesus often criticized the religious leaders for trying to draw attention to themselves instead of trying to honor God or to simply show kindness or to meet the needs of others who were less fortunate.

The temple was structured in such a way that giving was a fairly public act. There were thirteen collection boxes lined up in the courtyard, each shaped like a trumpet at the top that led to the box below where all the money was collected. These boxes were set up for people to give voluntarily to various temple ministries. The offerings placed in these boxes were not required (like the temple tax was), but they were free-will offerings for special causes.

Because of the way things were set up, people generally knew who gave larger amounts and who gave smaller amounts. There was no paper money at this time, so offerings consisted only of coins. The coins were made of different metals of different weights and sizes depending on how much they were worth. Some were made of gold, some of silver, and some of copper. People paid attention when a large gift was put into the collection boxes because it made a lot of noise. The loud clanging of many heavy coins falling into the trumpet was unmistakable.

Jesus was sitting across from this area and saw what was going on. Mark's gospel tells us that many rich people were dropping in large amounts. Everyone was surely paying attention to these people, yet as Jesus watched, it was a woman who caught his attention. In the midst of all these large, loud gifts going into the treasury, she dropped in a seemingly insignificant amount, something so small that it wouldn't have many any sound, but Jesus noticed her.

We are told that this woman was a "poor widow" which meant that she had no means of supporting herself (because women could not work or own property - even if they were widows). Presumably she had no family to help provide for her, so the only money she had was alms for the poor - or handouts she received - so she barely had enough to survive. Luke tells us that she put in two small copper coins - the equivalent in our money would be like someone putting a dime or a quarter in the offering plate today. So hers was not a very impressive gift to most people. However, Jesus is not most people, and he was very impressed.

The contrast between this woman and the religious leaders is significant. Jesus had just finished talking about how the religious leaders were so concerned about themselves that they preyed on widows, who had little or nothing, in order to line their own pockets (through the mandatory Temple Tax). Here, he pointed to a widow whose pockets were almost empty, and yet she still wanted to worship, she still wanted to serve, she still wanted to help others, and she was only concerned about giving her all as an offering to the Lord.

Jesus told his disciples that this woman put more into the collection boxes than all of the others. That statement was probably confusing to the disciples; after all, they could see that she was poor and had put something small into the collection. How could Jesus say that she put in more than anyone else? Jesus answered the question in their minds in verse 4. He said,

*"All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth;
but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."*

Jesus' value statement wasn't about how much money she put in, but rather the level of sacrifice involved and the motives of her heart. The wealthy gave what they could afford, what they could spare, while she gave all she had - out of her need and not out of her excess. Jesus recognized that her sacrificial gift demonstrated her dependence upon God and love for Him.

Having seen the way Jesus commended the widow we can begin to draw some principles from the story. I think there are at least three principles we can glean from this account.

First, our giving should be motivated by a desire to honor God rather than ourselves. All those who put in large amounts of money may not have been concerned about how others viewed them, but some certainly were. Surely some loved the fact that everyone paid attention to them when they gave their offerings. What we see is that our decision of what to give should not be influenced by whether anyone will see us give or know what we have given.

Pastor and author Kent Hughes wrote this question,

“What would happen to our great national charities today without celebrity benefits, or published subscribers' lists, or bronze plaques, or pictures of donors holding three-foot-long checks or standing beside crippled children?” [I don't know]

The fact is that much of the charitable giving in America today is done because people look highly upon those who give to these causes. Any time there is a major need, we hear about celebrities who give millions of dollars to help - even if it is a small fraction of their wealth.

While most of us will never be able to give a gift large enough to make headlines, it is still tempting to take pride in the fact that we give more than others. Even if you don't feel that you are giving a large amount, you may still feel proud to fulfilled your obligation to the Lord. When we feel prideful or smug or self-satisfied about our giving, it becomes more about us than about God (or the needs of others) and that is the attitude that was condemned by Jesus.

Second, God desires sacrificial giving. Jesus' assessment of the difference between the people who gave much and the widow who gave little had to do with the fact that they gave out of their abundance - leftovers - while she gave out of her substance - a true sacrifice.

Again, Kent Hughes addresses the issue. He says,

We must give in such a way that we go without something we would like to hang on to - travels forgone, clothing and cars that wait for another season, pleasures put off.

King David understood this concept. In 2 Samuel 24, we can read about David purchasing a threshing floor where he would offer a sacrifice to God. A threshing floor is a hard surface where you would loosen (or thresh) the edible part of grain (or other crop) from the straw to which it was attached.

I've seen the likely place David purchased in Israel. It is basically the base of the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and it may even be the same site where Abraham offered to sacrifice his only son Isaac. When David went to the owner to ask him how much he wanted for this space, the owner said that he would gladly give it to his king. David responded by saying, *"No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God a gift that cost me nothing."* (2 Samuel 24:24) God-honoring giving always involves a costly sacrifice.

The third principle is that giving is less about the money and more about the heart. In this passage Jesus was commending the heart of the widow more than the gift of the widow. What we need to see is that the widow's gift revealed the widow's heart.

God does not need our money, but He wants our heart (which is often attached to it). My Mom didn't need or even want the owl I gave to her, so why did she treasure it so much? To her that simple gift carried with it the message, *"I love you more."* God wants the same.

If you're like me, you find these principles to be hard teachings. We live in America where we are rabidly devoted to ourselves - which means we want to keep what we have and spend it on our own comforts. That is why so many advertisements say, *"Get the _____ you deserve!"* Which means they are appealing to your sense of entitlement and selfishness to motivate you to buy something you probably don't need. Sacrificial giving is counter-cultural. It begins with knowing that we have enough as a result of God's grace. The kind of attitude Jesus commends in the widow is one that recognizes we ought to be willing to give anything and everything we have to please God in gratitude for all that God had already done for us and given to us.

Let's get practical. How can we go about giving in a way that pleases the Lord?

First, we need to recognize that there is no magic amount of money every person should give. What is a sacrifice for you may be easy for me, or vice versa. It is impossible to set a dollar amount that each person should give because we have different incomes and we need to give in proportion to what we have. In the church, we emphasize the tithe (that is 10% of our income) to support the ongoing ministries of our home church. This is a biblical principle, which Jesus commended, and the religious people in Jesus' day used it as their standard.

Tithing is still a good spiritual discipline but I think it is just a starting place. Of all the things God calls us to do, it is really one of the simplest and most straightforward ways to grow as a disciple and to demonstrate our faithfulness. However, as we can see from this passage (and others like it), God doesn't just want us to tithe; He wants us to see everything we have as a tool that should be devoted to His glory. That is one reason we invite you to give tithes and offerings. An offering is technically anything we give over our tithe, but is also those special gifts we designate for particular purposes, like our annual Mission offering.

Second, we should work at living sacrificially.

Let me share some simple examples that can help be more intentionally sacrificial.

- Give up an item you'd like to buy and give the money to honor God.
- Choose to go on a mission trip rather than an extravagant vacation (as soon as we're able).
- Choose to turn off the TV and pray for those who are lost or struggling.
- Give up a night out and give the money you would have spent to help someone else.
- Decide to forego some activity you enjoy to spend that time serving God in some way.
- Make it a discipline to pray and decide how much you will give to the Lord's work, or to help people in need, before you think about what you need to pay your bills. It has always amazed me how my resources stretch farther whenever I put God first in my giving.

Consider this other way of sacrificing. Dave Ramsey has pointed out that many of us don't have money to give because we have it tied up in other places - including debt. Most of us spend money we don't have on things we don't really need - financed by borrowing - which ends up enslaving us to creditors and the interest they charge. As a result we can get so far behind that we have limited discretionary funds that are readily available (plus anxiety as a bonus). We all need to work at living more simply, by only buying what we can afford at the time, and saving up and waiting to buy what is temporarily out of our reach financially.

My wife and I have lived debt free for over 20 years, except for our mortgage, and we paid that off a couple of years ago. I say that not to brag, God has blessed us in so many ways, but to show that it can be done, and that it's great. When you live debt free, within your means, it frees you up to be open to opportunities God places before you where you can give generously to meet the needs of others. I would much rather give my money to the church or to missions or to help someone in need than to pay a bank or a credit card company or some other lender.

John Wesley had a famous sermon on giving in which his first point was,

- ***"Make all the money you can"*** and I imagine the guy in the front row said ***"Amen!"***
- Wesley's second point was ***"save all the money you can"*** and the guy in the front said ***"Amen to that, brother!"***
- Wesley's third point was, ***"GIVE all the money you can"*** and the guy in the front said, ***"Why did he have to spoil a good sermon!?"***

Seriously, one motivation for managing money well is so that you can give more away.

The third challenge is to examine your motives for giving. I enjoy a Christian satire site called *"The Babylon Bee."* **Satire** is the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary topical issues. Sometimes satire is too sarcastic for my tastes, or it hits too close to home, but it always challenges me to rethink my motives. A recent post was about **giving to missions.**

It was entitled the top five reasons to give to the less fortunate. It said this,

There are many reasons why it's advantageous for Christians to give to the less fortunate (Jesus may have said a thing or two about it, but we're too busy to fact-check that right now).

In case you need a little motivation to be a blessing to others, we asked the nation's top experts on charity about the benefits that come along with being generous to the downtrodden - and apart from the most obvious things - like feeling good and stuff - here they are:

- 1. So your pastor will stop nagging you about it.** It's super annoying when pastors keep gently encouraging you to be generous. Maybe if you start giving, he'll stop passive-aggressively pestering you about being selfish with the resources God has blessed you with.
- 2. To get rid of all that annoying loose change.** If you're having trouble getting your gourmet, artisan coffee into your car's cup holder each morning thanks to the pile of quarters overflowing from the top, it's time to give.
- 3. Tax deductions, obviously.** Tax-deductible donations are the best - it's like giving money and getting money all in one. In fact, biblical scholars now believe the widow in Mark 12 and Luke 21 gave her coins primarily out of a desire to reduce her taxable income for the year.
- 4. So you can share about it on social media.** This should go without saying, but one of the most significant reasons to give is so you can blow your proverbial trumpet about it online. For example, if you give money to a homeless person on the street, take a selfie as you hand him the cash, and create your own hashtag like #JohnGivesBack so people can follow your charitable giving and heap praise upon you in the form of likes, follows, and re-tweets.
- 5. To force God to bless you back.** God signed a contract before the foundation of the world stating that anyone who plants a faith-seed by giving will get paid a thousandfold in return, in cash, within 30 days or less. Yeah, it seems like a pretty lopsided deal, but who are we to question His wisdom? Anyway, you can take advantage of this faith-seed loophole and give money for the sole reason that God will make you rich, healthy, famous, and beautiful.

Just to be clear that is satire, which means - None of that is true. None of it! It's worse than nonsense, some of it's not only stupid but it's sinful as well.

Here are some Biblical motivations for giving:

- We give to honor God, and to advance His agenda and priorities in the world
- We give as an act of worship and in obedience to God who has called to generosity
- We give as an extension of the love of God toward others
- We give to pass on the blessings God gives us to others who are in greater need
- We give to help those who cannot help themselves
- We give so that others might see and experience the grace of Christ through us

This is a difficult sermon for me to preach for a number of reasons. One of the major complaints people outside the church have against Christianity is that preachers are always trying to get their money. Now that we have so many people watching online, I am a bit more self-conscious about it. Early on in this pandemic, when we quickly learning how to do video or online worship, I posted a meme on Facebook. It had Forrest Gump on a park bench, making that puzzled face of his and saying, *“And just like that, we were all Televangelists.”* I don’t have the hair for it but - Lord have mercy - that is not what we wanted to be associated with.

If it helps - 100% of our Mission offering will be going outside the doors of our church. It will go first to our international mission partners who serve in Ghana and Russia, and then as we’re able it will help our partners in Thailand, and the Dominican Republic - all places where there is tremendous poverty and spiritual need. Some will also go to support local missions.

Those international mission partnerships are on top of the many things we do locally, regionally, and nationally each and every week - too many examples to mention. Let me share this one example, since this pandemic started, our church has helped to feed between 200-300 people each week, and another 3000+ people each month through our Food Pantry ministry at our Boone Campus, and at our Sunday Night Live ministry in Covington. We have many great ministry partners who have helped make that possible, and a wonderful team of volunteers, but none of that would be possible without generous giving from people like you. Thank you!

This sermon is also difficult one to preach because I have to practice what I’m preaching better than I have up to now for at least two reasons. Number one, because I’ve been giving as a discipline for so long it sometimes becomes a habit that I can do without thinking or evaluating my motives and keeping my heart focused right. Tithing is easy, I just do the math and write a check. That is one reason I enjoy an opportunity to give a special offering to something like missions. It forces me to pray, and consider how much to give, and to think about the people in need we are trying to help, and it reminds me to pray for our mission partners - who are lifting up the light of Christ in some dark places in the world.

The second reason this is challenging is because I know I could give more - not just to this special offering but to all sorts of things. So I commit to being more prayerful and sensitive and obedient as God leads me to new opportunities to give. I hope you will as well.