

Mark 12:38-44 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 marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then 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. 44 For 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.”

## SHARING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The Apostle Paul had a problem with the church at Corinth. In the early church the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was a kind of like a potluck supper. It was a real meal in addition to being a very important sacrament.

But, in the Corinthian Church there were some who were gluttons at this sacred meal.

Those who had a lot started the meal early and didn't leave enough food for those who didn't have much. The less fortunate members would go away from the meal hungry while other members would have a drunken feast.

Paul was not happy. He said that when the members of the church refused to share they showed contempt for the church of God and humiliated those who had nothing. In fact when they did not share, they were not really celebrating the Lord's Supper. Paul said that there is nothing sacramental about selfishness. (See 1 Corinthians 11:20-22)

Sharing was at the heart of the early Christian Church. In the book of Acts the birth of the church was marked by a group of people who voluntarily shared their lives with each other. They ate together, they shared their possessions and they worshipped God together.

It wasn't Communism because nobody forced them to share. It was spontaneous and voluntary. The power of the Spirit enabled them to share. And it changed their world.

## GRATITUDE

I think that voluntarily sharing with each other and those in need is still an important response to the prompting of God's Spirit. Indeed I would argue that this is the key point in any biblical doctrine of stewardship.

God has been good to us. God is our Creator, in God we live and move and have our being. All that we are and all that we have is a gift from God.

In addition in Jesus God has saved us. Our sins are forgiven. We have been given a new life. If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation.

So how do we respond to such amazing grace? We respond with gratitude.

Out of gratitude we share what we have with each other and with the large family of faith.

I think it's wonderful that our Stewardship Season often comes near Thanksgiving each year because this is what biblical stewardship is all about, giving thanks to God.

## TOOLS OF THE FAITH

I like tools. I own lots of tools.

But, some of the tools I own have not been that helpful because I do not know how to use them properly. If I would take the time to use those tools more I would probably treasure them. But, as it is those tools are just gathering dust in my garage.

It's the same way with what we have... our time, our talent and our money. If we do not put them to good use, it's a waste of what we have been given. We are not using the gifts of God for the people of God.

We often complain about what we don't have. But, God's Spirit reminds us that in fact we have a lot to give.

Even the most humble among us have gifts gathering dust in the garage of our life when they could be used for the service of God's kingdom.

## TALK TO THE WIDOWS

Several years ago a young minister was an associate pastor at a large church. They hired one of these professional fundraisers to help with a capital funds

campaign. At the initial meeting, the fundraiser asked the committee about their goals for the campaign.

One of the members said, “You have to understand that we are a church that has a high percentage of older people, mostly widows on fixed incomes. So we really can’t expect to raise much money.”

The fundraiser asked to see a list of the major givers. And he took the list with him at the close of the meeting. At the next meeting he told the committee that he had done an analysis of the congregation’s giving and this is what he found,

“The majority of the top fifty contributors are widows on fixed incomes. According to my calculations those widows on fixed incomes pay about 60 percent of this congregation’s annual budget.

If you want to improve giving in this congregation, you need to talk to those women first.

Find out why they give, and then try to infect the rest of the congregation with the faith of these widows on fixed incomes.”

## THE BIBLE AND MONEY

The Bible tells us that how we use our money tells us a lot about what we believe. I once did a research paper on the relationship between money and the work of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. I was shocked that I had so much material.

Even a cursory survey of the Scripture showed that the coming of God's Spirit was often associated with people changing their attitude toward money and their possessions. In fact the explosive growth of the early church seemed tied to this Spirit of generosity.

Our lesson for today is yet another example of a long line of stories from the Old and New Testament which talk about the relationship between money and faith.

Jesus and his disciples were watching as people put money into the temple treasury. There were thirteen chests scattered around the temple in which this particular offering was taken.

Each chest had a large trumpet like opening on top of the chest. The word for trumpet in Hebrew is shofar. And so logically these chests were called shofar chests or trumpet chests.

First, the wealthy came to pay their tithe. They put in large sums of money. It was impressive. When those donors put a lot of heavy coins into that chest there would be a loud clanging sound. I suspect it was rather like when the children sometimes take up our two cents a meal offering.

I'm sure some heads would turn and nod in appreciation when they heard this loud offering. But, Jesus didn't say anything. He just watched.

And then this widow appeared...so poor that all she had was two small almost worthless coins. And what did she do? She gave them away.

The curious thing is that she herself was one of Israel's poor for whom this offering was intended. She had so little that her offering barely made a sound as she tossed it into the trumpet chest.

And yet for Jesus her offering was an example of great faith and more than that, it was a trumpet call announcing the beginning of a new age.

This widow gave all that she had and in so doing she trusted in God alone to deliver her. And in the Providence of God the Savior was watching. The

One who came to save her and the world was watching.

## A GREATER GIFT

The gift of the widow is praiseworthy because out of her poverty and without reservation she gave her whole living to God. But, there is more to this gift than meets the eye. Her gift foreshadows the gift that Jesus is about to give.

Jesus will give more than his living; Jesus will give his very life.

And so the poor widow is a sign of the gift that is to come, the gift of the One who “though he was rich, yet for (our) sake became poor, so that by his poverty (we) might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

The sacrificial love of Christ provides the motivation for our stewardship.

Paul wrote that our attitude should be the same as that of Jesus “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and

became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8)

In other words the sacrifice of Christ provides a pattern for us to follow. We give because Jesus died for our sins on the cross. Our salvation is the basic motivation for our giving.

Our family used to sing a hymn, “Something for Thee.” And the first line of that hymn went,

“Savior, thy dying love, thou gavest me, nor should I aught withhold, dear Lord, from Thee.

In love my soul would bow, my heart fulfill its vow,  
some offering bring Thee now, something for Thee.”

Our last hymn, a hymn that we usually sing during Holy Week is another good example of this theology.

“When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

These past few weeks we've talked about why we should give. We share a common ministry. It's what we do together.

But, when we dig down to the core of why we give it's out of gratitude for the salvation of God as revealed in Jesus.

God gives us a heavenly treasure that is not subject to the ups and downs of the stock market. God gives us an eternal treasure that is not subject to theft or decay.

And the only way to receive that treasure is to open our hands and let go of those things that we love too much, those things that are keeping us from reaching out to God.

There are many people who encourage us to give for the wrong reason.

They say that we should give in order to get a blessing.

But, that's not giving at all. That's buying.

And blessings can't be bought.

## OPEN HANDS, OPEN HEARTS

Blessings can only be received with hands and hearts that are open.

If you really believe in the grace of God you are going to be thankful, and you are going to give. The thankful heart is so full that it will burst if it doesn't give something away. On the other hand a greedy person is often trapped by desire.

I used to do a children's sermon about something called a monkey trap.

Supposedly the natives in the jungle knew a foolproof way to catch a monkey. They would cut a hole in a gourd that was just big enough for a monkey to get his open hand through.

Then they would put something in that gourd that the monkey wanted very much... a nut or a piece of fruit. Finally, they would attach the gourd to a tree.

The monkey would greedily try to grasp his prize, but he would soon find that his closed fist would not pass through the small hole. And if the monkey did not let go, he would be trapped by his own greed and captured by his hunters.

I'm not sure if that is a true story. I'm not sure monkeys are dumb enough to be trapped in this way.

But, I do know that we humans are dumb enough to be trapped in this way. Often, we are just like the monkey with his hand stuck in the gourd. We become our own jailors, prisoners to our fears and desires.

And yet if we could only let go of those things that hold us back we could be free. We could raise our hands toward heaven we could receive the blessing of God.

## SAVED BY AN OFFERING

A priest who had been sent to serve on an island in the Pacific was walking to church. A beggar who knew the priest would be passing this way stopped the priest and said, "Give me a coin."

The priest, anxious to be on his way, did so. The next Sunday the beggar was waiting for him and the Sunday after that.

The priest didn't want to be bothered every week in this way, so the next Sunday when he spotted the

beggar he spoke first. He said, "Give me an offering for the church." The beggar looked confused, but he shifted through his pockets and came up with a coin. The following Sunday the beggar was waiting for the priest again with his offering ready.

On the next Sunday the priest said, "Bring your coin to the church and give it yourself." The beggar did as the priest requested.

To make a long story short, coming to church changed the beggar. Some of the church members found him a job. Eventually he became a convert to the Christian faith.

And when it came time for the priest to leave the former beggar said, "I never knew I had anything to give until you asked me."

In a certain sense all of us are beggars, helpless and uncertain in a world that is out of control. We have our excuses for not giving our time, talent and money to God's kingdom. But, in the end it all boils down to a lack of faith, a lack of trust in God.

God doesn't see us as beggars just scraping by. God sees us his children. We are heirs to the heavenly kingdom.

And as children of the king all of us have something to contribute. All of us have something to give.

## EXCUSES

I have a friend who is the pastor of a very successful church. But, in a sermon he made a shocking statement. 30% of the members who attended that church on a regular basis never gave a dime to the church.

I was blown away. Despite the success of that church 30% of the members had a significant spiritual problem. How can a person understand the depth of God's grace and then give nothing to support God's work in the world?

Through the years I've heard all sorts of excuses. "I'll give when there is a specific need. I don't like the political stands the church is taking. I don't like where the church is going now. Do better and maybe I'll give."

But, the best answer to all these excuses came from an elder in North Carolina. He was very regular and generous in his giving.

And he and his wife were very adamant about the joys of stewardship. They told stories of how, when they were young they tithed even though they didn't know where their next meal was coming from.

But, with a smile they said, "God always took care of us."

At a Session meeting when some were grouching about how our money was being used by the wider church he said,

"When I give money to the church, I'm giving money to the Lord. If someone uses that money in a way that doesn't glorify God, that's their problem, not mine. The Lord knows what I am doing. The Lord sees my heart. And that's enough for me."

That's what our lesson for today teaches us. We don't have to impress anyone with our giving. We don't have to wear our religion on our sleeve.

Just as the Lord was watching as a widow give her two cents worth long ago, so the Lord is watching us as well. He knows what we give and why.

In the final analysis giving is not a referendum on what we think about the church or a way to get what

we want. Giving is simply the way we express our love and gratitude to God.

So, this Sunday and every Sunday with gratitude and joy we bring our gifts to God.

Amen.