

The Generous Widow

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Introduction.

- A. A couple of months ago, one of the officials for John McCain's presidential campaign got in trouble for calling America "a nation of whiners." He ended up losing his position, but it was less for being wrong than for uttering a truth that was politically inconvenient. I know whining and excuse-making have been around since Adam and Eve, but it seems to me that even in my lifetime, blame-shifting has become the new national hobby. People aren't going into foreclosure because they got greedy and bought more house than they could afford; instead, they were innocent victims of the bad, bad mortgage broker who lied to them.
- B. Sadly, this attitude is also appearing with greater frequency among members of the Lord's church. They know that the Bible teaches they should put God first. They know that in their own commitments of money and time, they are doing anything but. However, instead of taking steps to solve the problem, they begin to compile massive lists of excuses about why they can't do what God wants. They're too busy, the bills are too high, and so on and so forth. Sometimes, these excuses make a public appearance. Mostly, they just echo eloquently inside the Christian's head and keep him from a closer walk with God.
- C. By contrast, the story of a woman who was completely excuse-free appears in Mark 12:41-44. She held nothing back from God. What she had, she gave, and even though her contribution scarcely registered on the balance sheets of the temple, Jesus saw what she did and held her up as an example to all of us. If we want to please Jesus, we need to be like her. Let's look, then, at the story of the generous widow.

I. Our Stewardship

- A. As we look at this story, one of the first things we need to do is to make an application of its message beyond the immediate context. Although this story is certainly about money, **IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT MONEY.** Instead, this is a story about stewardship. As just about all of you know, right now, John Meyer is teaching an entire class on stewardship in Scripture, and part of that class involves financial stewardship. This is entirely appropriate. Consider, for instance, the words of Jesus in Luke 16:11-12. Although the word "stewardship" does not actually appear in this text, the idea most certainly does. America is a nation that believes in the free market, and although that's not necessarily a bad way to be, it can create in our minds the idea that we alone have control over the money that we possess. Actually, as this passage makes clear, we don't own our possessions. Every material thing really belongs to God. God has just entrusted us with the wealth we have to see how we manage it, just like we might turn our retirement funds over to a stockbroker. This probationary period lasts until we die, and then God takes it all back and gives it to somebody else. The way that we handle our small amount of material wealth will determine whether God will give us spiritual riches of our own. Only if we are good stewards of our financial blessings from Him will we receive our eternal inheritance.
- B. That kind of stewardship is one of the things that the story of the generous widow is about, but it's not the only kind of stewardship we need to recognize. Look at 1 Peter 4:10. Certainly, we do receive our wealth from God, but that's not the only earthly blessing we have from His hand. Instead, to fathom the extent of our stewardship of God's blessings, we have to look at the balance sheet of our lives. Most of us, thankfully, will live reasonably long, healthy lives. We have those years of life from God, and we hold them as His stewards. All of us have abilities and personality attributes, and those are also things that we have from God that He expects us to use for Him. Let me give you some examples. As a result of my talents and inclination and training, I'm a reasonably good writer. I have the ability to arrange words in an understandable way quickly and without a great deal of effort. That is a gift from God. I can misuse my gift by making an idol out of writing the way that many writers do, and using it to glorify myself, or I can use my gift to serve God and glorify His name. Only as I do the latter am I being a good steward of the gift I have received.
- C. Similarly, in the time since I got married, I've come to learn that my wife is a very sensitive, empathetic person. I myself am about as sensitive as a combat boot. I can go for weeks without worrying about how someone will take something I say. Not so with her. She's always worrying about how so-and-so is doing, or about what thus-and-such said to her. That sensitivity is also a gift from God that she holds in stewardship. She can misuse the gift by becoming a touchy person who gets offended if you say two words to her, or she can use it as God wants, by letting it lead her to be compassionate toward other people and caring for them.
- D. So, then, all of us are stewards of various gifts from God, and **GOD IS PAYING ATTENTION** to what we're doing in our stewardship. In the story of the generous widow, Jesus physically observed her as she deposited her gift, but God is always spiritually watching over each one of us. Jesus tells us so in Matthew 10:29-30. God is always paying attention, both so He can care for our needs and so He can learn how we're doing in our stewardship. It's like when a principal steps into a classroom to conduct an evaluation of a teacher, except our evaluation is constant. That's what will determine whether we are faithful or unfaithful in our stewardship.

II. What's Important to God.

- A. The story of the generous widow is so important because it tells us just how God is evaluating us. First of all, it tells us that **THE AMOUNT IS UNIMPORTANT**, whether it's money or work that God is evaluating. This is not the way that human beings work. I'm certain that the temple officials who saw the widow give weren't overwhelmed by the size of her contribution. Instead, they were much more impressed by all the wealthy Jews who contributed much more money in an absolute sense. However, that's not the way that God thinks. Instead, He takes our resources into account as He evaluates our performance. We see this clearly in Matthew 25:20-23. Here, Jesus is discussing the two faithful servants of the parable of the talents. These two servants do not return to their master with identical amounts of money. One shows up with five extra talents, the other with only two. Nonetheless, the master receives them with an identical welcome, because he takes their starting situation into account. The two-talent servant wasn't expected to perform at a five-talent level, because he only had two talents to start with. In the same way, God takes our circumstances into account. For instance, one of the brethren who used to worship with my in-laws at Kleinwood was one of the founding partners of Compaq Computers. The man retired a multi-multi-millionaire. Come time for the collection, God does not expect me to put the same amount of money in the plate as that millionaire brother, because He knows that we have different capacities to give. The same is true of what we do with our non-financial gifts. God is not going to measure my work by the same standard as everybody else's, because He knows that all of His servants have different levels of ability, and it would be unfair to expect the same work from each.
- B. On even deeper level, it would be unfair of God to look at the amount because He Himself gave us our gifts in the first place. This is the point of 1 Corinthians 12:18-19. For each one of us, the gifts that we have been given suit us for a particular place in the body of the Lord. I have been given a skill set by God that suits me to be a preacher, but that same skill set makes me useless at the things that many of you do for Him. The extent of my skills is also determined by God. For instance, the brother who followed me in the Dowlen Road training program is named Shawn Jeffries. I don't have to listen to him for two minutes before I recognize that he is a better pulpit speaker than I am. On the other hand, as far as I know, Shawn has never written a hymn in his life. It would be just as unfair for God to judge me by Shawn's skill set as it would be for Him to judge Shawn by my skill set. He would be holding us responsible for something we can't control.
- C. Instead, God evaluates our stewardship by something that we can control. To God, **THE HEART IS WHAT'S IMPORTANT**. That's why the widow's gift made more of an impression of Jesus than all the others. He wasn't looking at absolute amounts like the temple officials were. He was looking at the heart. He saw that all the other contributors had a heart that only moved them to give something to God, but the widow had a heart that moved her to give everything. She had a heart that moved her to put God first. This was exactly the attitude that Jesus was advocating in Matthew 6:33. It is the expression of faith that believes that God will take care of us if we put Him first. This needs to be true in a financial sense. I can remember, back when Lauren and I were about to get married, that the preachers there put me through a pre-marital counseling course. As part of that, they had me fill out a budget worksheet. The first line was where I put my monthly income, and the second line was where I subtracted out my contribution to the Lord's work. The lesson was plain. They were saying to me, "What you give back to God isn't what's left over after you've done whatever else you wanted with your money. Instead, what you give back to God comes first, and then you arrange the rest of your budget around that." Friends, that's the attitude that all of us need to have, with our money, with our time, and with our labor. We need to give to God first, and then whatever's left over after that is for us. Now, the category of what we give to God may be broader than we realize. For instance, the Scripture plainly tells us that God wants us to spend time working to support our families. However, we need to view our entire lives through the lens of Scripture, so that God's priorities for our gifts from Him are our priorities too.
- D. If we do this, God makes a promise about what we will receive as a result. We see this promise in the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:8. If we are generous with our money, God will see to it that we will always have money to be generous with. If we are generous with the talents that He has given us, God will see to it that we are able to continue working usefully for Him. Now, this obviously isn't a get-rich-quick scheme. Contributing to the Lord's work isn't like buying a spiritual lottery ticket, where we do it because we hope to get more out of the deal. However, if we are good stewards, our stewardship will prosper.
- E. The reason why God is so concerned with how we use these gifts from Him is that it tells Him who we really are. This is what's behind the words of Christ in Matthew 6:19-21. Where our treasure is is where our heart is too. We constantly need to ask ourselves, brethren, where our money goes, where our time goes, and where our labor goes. Are we more likely to drop a hundred bucks in the collection plate or give it to a brother in need, or are we more likely to spend it on our own wants? If there's a workday at the building Saturday morning, are we going to be here, or are we going to be tending to our own property? If the elders call us to some new work for the Lord, do we answer the call, or do we just keep doing the same thing we've always been doing? Remember, folks, it's not about how much we have to give, of money or time or effort. It's about what we do with what we have, and only if our heart is set on heaven can we hope to abide there.

Conclusion. If your heart is set on heaven, but you haven't been doing right, now's the day to repent.