

THE BIGGEST OFFERING EVER GIVEN**MARK 12:41-44**

I invite you this morning to use one of God's gifts to every human being – your imagination! We're in the city of Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago. We're entering the great Temple where Jews have worshipped God for centuries. See the massive stones. Feel the crush of many bodies around you. As we pass the outer Court of the Gentiles, we enter into the Court of the Women which is open to all men and women of Jewish ethnicity. Arranged strategically around that court are 13 metal boxes called "The Trumpets." They're called that because each box has a long, trumpet-shaped opening in which people deposit their offerings for the ministry and upkeep of the Temple. Can you see them? Sitting beside one of the Trumpets is none other than Jesus Himself. Why is He there and what's He doing? Perhaps He's resting from the weariness of teaching on the Temple grounds. Perhaps He's discouraged from facing the constant hostility of the Jewish religious leaders who wanted to argue with Him and catch Him in some kind of theological mistake. Jesus sits there watching and observing.

Imagine sitting next to Jesus. You see lots of people streaming into the Temple to worship God. You see many of them bringing a gift of money and throwing it into one of those offering boxes. Because it's made of metal, the box clanks and clinks loudly every time a coin slides down its trumpet-like throat. You hear some moderate sounding clinks depending on the number and size of the coins being deposited. Several wealthy people come to worship God that day and to give an offering. Now it's important to these rich folk that when they throw their money down the long, trumpet-like opening that a certain sound comes back out – not little clinks, not even healthy clanks, but instead a loud, very satisfying crash! Can you see lots of heads turning around at that sound – people's faces a mixture of both admiration and envy? The rich have just given their offering – bags of silver and gold coins – with much fanfare.

That performance concluded, you and Jesus now see someone else approaching the offering box. Her clothing tells you that she's poor. She's also a widow which means she's really poor – the poorest of the poor. Jesus and you watch as the woman approaches an offering box. You notice her embarrassed facial expression. It's clear to you that she doesn't want anyone to notice her or her gift. You watch as she takes out two small, painfully thin, copper coins and lets them trickle down the mouth of the open trumpet. They made no sound at all as they slipped from her fingers and fall into the offering box. No crash. No clank. Not even a respectable clink. Maybe a tinkle that no one heard! Just as you're about to dismiss this woman and her gift as insignificant, something stirs within Jesus. He calls His other disciples over to the two of you, points out the woman as she slips away and says, "Let me tell you something true. That poor widow right there just put more into that offering box than anyone else. All the others gave an offering to God out of their wealth, but she – well, she just gave to God her very last cent. Observe and learn: she just gave the biggest offering of all!"

Now, let's read the story as the Bible records it. Over the next three Sundays, we're going to live with this story and ask some questions of it. Better yet, we're going to allow the story to ask some questions of us! I'm calling this short message series, "Two

Copper Coins” which was the amount of the woman’s offering. Please observe three truths about the poor widow’s gift that emerge from this story.

HER GIFT IS IRONIC.

Like many of Jesus’ stories, this story about Jesus is full of wonderful ironies. The largest irony might be in how we define a “big offering”. I’m prone to define a big offering here at Karl Road Baptist as anything over \$14,000 which is what we need to receive every week to stay current on our mission giving and expenses. How would you define a “big offering” personally speaking? Did you give the Lord a “big offering” a few minutes ago? Is a “big offering” giving the largest bill in your wallet on a given Sunday? Is it giving \$5 a week whether the church needs it or not? Is a “big offering” a tithe – 10% - of your income? It’s a wonderful irony that the one person in the New Testament that’s lifted up to us as a prime example of a big offering was a dirt poor widow. She gave exactly two, copper leptas. A lepta was the smallest coin in circulation in that part of the world then. Scholars tell us it ranged in value from one-fourth to one-sixteenth of one penny in today’s money. A lepta was worth very little. That dear woman gave a total of less than one penny to the Lord that day! But here Jesus lifts up this woman as the biggest giver ever and her two copper coins as the biggest offering ever.

Most of us believe pretty much the same thing as people back in Jesus’ day. Since wealthy people can afford to make large financial contributions and since churches and ministries need large amounts of money for ministry, we tend to believe that large financial gifts to the Lord’s work are more significant than small gifts. But Jesus challenges that assumption. He challenges the whole definition of “big” and “small” as we understand it when it comes to financial giving. The Bible doesn’t tell us how Jesus knew that this was the poor widow’s last two coins, but that was evidently the case. All she had was two measly copper coins – two leptas – which was hardly enough to buy her next meal. She gave to the Lord literally all she had in her possession.

It’s been pointed out that giving both coins is significant. Even if she’d given one and kept one, her generosity would have been admirable. Imagine giving 50% of all the money at your disposable today to the Lord! But, no, she gave 100% - all she had – to God. Jesus underlines the irony in her gift. Sure, it was exceedingly small in actual value, but it was incredibly large in terms of what she had to give. It was all she had! In contrast, the rich people’s gifts were exceedingly large in actual value, but rather small in terms of the percentage of all that they could have given. While being impressive to those who saw them give it, the offerings of the rich were probably never missed all that much by the rich themselves. I doubt it affected their lifestyle choices on that or any other day! So the woman’s gift is ironic, but also...

HER GIFT IS AN ILLUSTRATION.

I wonder if one reason the poor widow’s offering had such an impact on Jesus was because it so effectively illustrated what He was about to do. This incident occurred late in the ministry of Jesus. It happened after what we call Palm Sunday which means it

occurred just a few days before Jesus' crucifixion. That poor widow's gift was ultimately the gift of herself. She gave everything – all – to God. In just a few days, Jesus was going to be asked to give everything to His Father. Yes, the kind of gift was different, to be sure. For the widow it was her last bit of financial means. For Jesus it was His very life. For both, however, it was the total gift of self. Last Sunday we shared Communion together at the close of the service. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was the ultimate gift of self. The bread symbolizes Jesus' broken body and the cup His shed blood. Every time we take Communion we're reminded that Jesus gave it all. It was absolutely necessary that Jesus give it all. Nothing halfway would have counted. Nothing less than His death in your place and mine on that cruel cross would have provided salvation for us. Jesus' recognized in that woman's actions an illustration of what He was being called to do so we would find salvation through Him.

The widow's gift is an illustration to us as well. But an illustration of what exactly? I'm not suggesting today that God expects you to give all of your money to the Lord's work, or every hour of every day, or every ounce of energy to some kind of ministry. That's not the point of this story. Instead, it's to challenge you and me as to what represents a "big offering" to the Lord in terms of our time, our talents, and our treasure. Whenever you give your time to the Lord's work in this church or in any kind of ministry, whenever you use a talent or ability for the Lord, and whenever you give your money to the Lord here or wherever, you give away something of yourself.

But how much of yourself do you really give away? That's the real point of the story! Is it the comfortable part? Is it the safe part? Is it the affordable part? Is it the leftover, easy part? Consider the poor widow. Nothing about her gift was comfortable, safe, affordable, leftover, or easy. She gave everything she had to God. Consider Jesus. There was nothing comfortable, safe, affordable, leftover, or easy about the cross. He gave everything He had to God. That question bangs around in my heart and head today. I'm personally challenged by it. How much of myself do I really give away? Am I ever like that poor widow? Am I ever like Jesus? Have I really given everything I have – my time, my talents, or my treasure – to the Lord? The poor widow's gift is ironic. Her gift is an illustration. But, truly, above all ...

HER GIFT IS AN INSPIRATION.

We're going to look at this story and its implications over these next three Sunday, but don't forget to just stand back, take it in, and enjoy it! It's like a beautiful sunset. There's a time and place to explain all the scientific and atmospheric reasons behind the beautiful colors. But there's also a time and a place to just drink in what you're seeing and be awed by it. You can only fully appreciate a sunset if you allow its beauty to speak into your soul. And you can only fully appreciate this story, too, if you allow its beauty to speak into your soul. Allow this story to ask you some questions.

Here's the first question. Have you every truly given yourself to Jesus? Yes, I'm talking about conversion, being born again, getting saved – whatever terminology you prefer. All those phrases and words point to giving myself to Jesus and asking Him to be both

my Savior and Lord in this life and forever. Have you given all of you – every nook and cranny of your life - to Jesus? The giving of your time, talents, and treasure day after day, month after month, and year after year is simply the outward and ongoing way you give yourself fully to Jesus. Yes, it was necessary for Jesus to give His all – His everything – to secure your salvation. And it's just as necessary for you to give your entire self to Him. Have you ever done that? Are you doing that today or are there parts of your life that you're holding back from Him? Don't buy into the American myth that being a follower of Jesus is only about believing certain things to be true of Jesus! You must become His follower, His disciple. That requires an absolute and unconditional surrender to the Great King of Heaven and a life of total trust in Him.

This story asks all of us here today other kinds of questions, too. Let's face it, the fact is that everyone in this room more closely resemble the other givers in the Temple that day rather than the poor widow. Compared to most of the world's population, everyone in this room is rich. The poor widow's offering searches us and might well expose the narrowness and smallness of whatever we offer to the Lord. Are we giving just the leftovers of our time, talent, and treasure to Jesus? Is it truly sacrificial giving – like that of this extraordinary woman? When we do give, is it to impress others or ourselves or is it truly to please the Lord? Do we give grudgingly or with joyful, thankful hearts? And is there something reckless – dare I say, extravagant – about how we give away our time, our spiritual gifts and our money to the Lord's work? Or is everything you give very measured, very precise, and very comfortable? I like the attitude of a woman from a rural, mountain area of our country I read about. This woman was visiting a relative who also happened to be a doctor. She wasn't feeling well physically. The doctor said, "Here, use this medicine." The woman asked, "How much did it cost?" He said, "You're a guest in my home. You know I'm not going to charge you for the medicine." The woman said, "I want to know how much it costs." "Why," asked the doctor, "is it important for you to know how much it cost?" The woman answered, "Because if I don't know how much it costs, I don't know how much to like it."

The poor widow's two little copper coins remind me that only the gift that costs me something counts for anything ultimately. God wants us to think about what matters most in life, what counts in life, and then give our time, our talents, and our treasure to what matters and counts the most! Life – from God's perspective – is about giving not getting. When the Holy Spirit speaks into your mind or heart about what matters and counts in this life, it is going to be about the use of your time, your talents, or your treasure. Is your time precious? Of course it is. But who controls your time? A disciple of Jesus can't say, "It's my time. I must protect it, keep it, and preserve it so that I can spend it on stuff that has no eternal significance whatsoever." No, a disciple of Jesus says, "My time belongs to You, Jesus, because You're my Lord. All of my time belongs to You. When I give my time, I give myself. Lord, help me to give all of my time to you – every minute of every day – and then help me trust the Holy Spirit to divide it up rightly into work portions, rest portions, recreation portions, and ministry portions. Jesus, You are the Lord of my time – all of it!"

Do your talents or your spiritual gifts matter or count? Of course they do. Who endowed you with those talents and gifts? A disciple of Jesus can't say, "It's my talent. It's my ability. I will decide if, when, and how it will be used." No, instead, a disciple says, "Jesus, all my talents belong to You. All of them. When I give my abilities to You, I'm giving myself. Lord, help me find out what they are and then give them all to You. Let me trust Your Spirit to show me how they should be used." Is your money – your treasure – important? Of course it is. A disciple of Jesus can't say, "It's my money. I must pay off all of my debts before I give to the Lord what belongs to Him – the tithe. I must make myself financially secure, then I'll give. I must pay for my children's education first. I must pay for my vacations and retirement first." No, instead a disciple says, "Lord Jesus, it's Your money – all of it. When I give my money, I give myself. I realize you give me the ability to earn money in order to live and take care of my family. I know you are a generous Lord. But I also realize that you expect me to return to You the tithe – one tenth of my income – without question or qualification because Your Word indicates that's the starting point of obedience. Let me then hear from Your Spirit to give additional offerings for anything and everything beyond the tithe." The closer you and I get to that mindset, that perspective, and that lifestyle, the closer we get to the poor widow's example and the closer we get to the heart of Jesus Himself.

Some of the best stories about giving come from the least affluent people in the poorest parts of the world. A state in the northeastern part of India – Mizoram – has had a Christian witness for over one hundred years. Churches in Mizoram have a beautiful phrase to express the way they give to God—"Buhfai Tham." It means "one handful of rice at a time." Here's how it works. Families in the church set aside a portion of rice at every meal for God. When they collect enough rice, they donate it to their local church. The church turns around and sells the rice to generate income. This started, apparently, back in 1914. Back then these Indian Christians used the sale of their rice to raise \$1.50 in U.S. money. But lately these Christians have been collecting \$1.5 million as they support 1,800 missionaries and support their local ministry, too. People have also started giving in more creative ways as vegetables, firewood, and other resources flow into the church's outreach for the kingdom. One church leader said, "There are many ways of serving the Lord. Some people do great things. Some people are great preachers. Some people contribute lots and lots of money. But when we talk about this 'Handful of Rice,' it is very humble. The service is done in the corner of the kitchen where nobody sees, but God knows and He blesses it." Another church member said, "It is not our richness or our poverty that make us serve the Lord, but our willingness. So we Mizo people say, 'As long as we have something to eat every day, we have something to give to God every day.'"

Are you inspired by the poor widow's offering? Jesus certainly was! Gifts that count cost the giver something. God has given us the gift of His love, but that gift cost Him deeply and profoundly. It cost Him the life of His Son, Jesus. There's nothing that we can offer to God that will somehow balance out the cost of His gift. But there is an appropriate response – a necessary response. The gift of yourself. All of you. The gift of myself. All of me. May God help us to give that gift.