



Potomac Hills
Community Church, PCA

GRACE ORIENTED • CHRIST CENTERED

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What Jesus said about a Poor Widow

“Revealed Grace” - a series from Luke
Luke 21:1-4

OPENING THOUGHTS: *The 8 warehouses of Wladziu Valentino*¹

When Wladziu Valentino died, entrepreneurs leased the Los Angeles Convention Center to display the almost 30,000 objects left from his estate.

This was an event for the well-heeled of L.A.

Why?

Mr. Valentino was better known as Liberace.

Thousands of people willingly paid six dollars each for the privilege of viewing the lavish remains of Liberace’s materialism. This was followed by an auction at Christie’s where another admission charge of ten dollars was levied in an attempt to lessen the size of the enthusiastic crowd.

In a frenzied auction, enormous amounts of money were paid by the decked out crowd for the **eight warehouses** of Liberace’s belongings.

At that incredible event money literally talked, as money was the only speech acknowledged by the auctioneer.

It also talked in other ways, for it eloquently revealed volumes about the heart of the deceased entertainer and the hearts of the competing bidders.

“Money talks” is more than a cliché.

It is a proverb of the heart.

In **Matthew 6:21**, Jesus said, “*Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be.*”

¹ Introduction and Exposition of the text is adapted from Preaching the Word: Luke, Volume Two by R. Kent Hughes, pages 288-294 and Moments with the Savior by Ken Gire, pages 307-312. Liberace story is adapted from the article, “Art, Antiquities, and Auction,” by Rachel Field, *Pan Am Clipper*, April 1988, page 13. Statistics on gambling come from the article, “The Demographics of Gambling,” by Brad Edmondson, *American Demographics* and a recent article in *TIME* on Indian Reservation Casinos. Description of the Temple treasury comes from The Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels by James Hastings, ed., page 748.

During the 1980's Americans spent over \$180 billion dollars per year on gambling, **fifteen times more** than it gave to its churches. In the last twelve years, the amount has more than doubled.

That is a tragic declaration of the heart of this country.

Money talks!

Aware of this, the Lord chose the temple treasury for His departing shot at His detractors before leaving the temple for good.

Money — **giving** — reveals the state of the heart as few other things can.

Thus Jesus chose **this setting** to contrast the phony righteousness of the religious leaders, who, according to the end of **Luke 20, verse 47**, "*But they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property, and then, to cover up the kind of people they really are, they make long prayers in public.*" This is contrasted with true devotion to God as seen in the life of one poor widow.

So Jesus is sitting in the Temple, **Luke 21:1**, "*While Jesus was in the Temple, He watched the rich people putting their gifts into the collection box.*"

The treasury where they placed their offerings consisted of thirteen brass treasure chests called trumpets because they were shaped like inverted horns, narrow at the top and enlarged at the bottom.

According to the Jewish writings called the *Mishnah*, each of the chests bore inscriptions designating what the offerings were for: "New Shekel dues,' 'Old Shekel dues,' 'Bird offerings,' 'Young birds for the whole offering,' 'Wood,' 'Frankincense,' 'Gold for the Mercy-seat,' and, on six of them 'Freewill-offerings.'"

Because of the Passover the treasury was a busy place as both locals and pilgrims crowded past the thirteen treasure chests and inserted their offerings into the narrow brass mouths made shiny by the constant friction of worshipers' hands.

Here, amidst the noise and commotion, Jesus could easily observe the givers without drawing attention to Himself.

Have you ever sat at an airport or a shopping mall and watched people over your newspaper or coffee? Such times can be fascinating.

And Jesus was very observant. He not only noted people's actions but also assessed their motives. Neither the widow, who was the main focus of Jesus' attention, nor the rest of the people had any idea they were being watched.

We too, are being watched in our least conscious moments.

Jesus really is watching us.

As Hannah said in her prayer, **1 Samuel 2:3**, "*The Lord is a God who knows your deeds; and He will judge you for what you have done.*"

And as later David prayed, **Psalms 139:2**, "*You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my every thought when far away.*"

Every action is important, and every action is seen by the One to whom we will give account.

That's important to know as we come to today's passage at the beginning of Luke 21. Listen carefully ...

Luke 21:1-4, *"While Jesus was in the Temple, He watched the rich people putting their gifts into the collection box. [2] Then a poor widow came by and dropped in two pennies. [3] 'I assure you,' He said, 'this poor widow has given more than all the rest of them. [4] For they have given a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she has.'"*

Jesus has been busy. He rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, heartbroken over the city, while crowds shouted Hosannas, having little idea of what was to come.

First, He cleansed the temple, driving out the merchants and moneychangers, and sealing the judgment made against Him by the religious authorities.

Then He faced a series of challenges from the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Herodians. They started by questioning His authority, then they hurled a series of trick questions at Him, trying to trap Him into an answer they could use against Him.

"Should we pay taxes?"

"What about the resurrection?"

Jesus asked them questions in return, about John's baptism and David's Lord, but they couldn't answer them.

So He finished chapter 20 with a warning about these people.

And on that note, His verbal battle with these leaders ends.

And after that note, silence. Something of a musical rest

Understandably, the Savior needs one.

Physically, mentally, emotionally, He's exhausted. He takes a break from the holiday crowd and finds a quiet place on a bench opposite the temple's treasure chests. For a change, all eyes are **not** on Him. Instead, they are on the twelve trumpet-shaped coffers where people are filing by to deposit their offerings.

Standing among them is a widow.

There's a place for widows in the ancient world.

But it's not a place of importance, like the Scribes.

And it's not a place of affluence, like the Priests.

It's a place of orphans and transients.

A place of dependence.

And she lived in that place.

She gleaned in the fields for leftovers, picking up the fruit left on the ground, gathering the grain left in the unharvested corners of the wheat fields.

When the harvest was over, she went to a place that need a little cleaning.
Or to a place that needed a little cooking.
Or to a place that needed a little sewing done.
She picked up work here and there, but it wasn't a livelihood. It was just a little ... enough to get by.

And that's how she lived.

A day at a time. A meal at a time. A prayer at a time.

The place she's at now is the temple treasury, where she's standing in line with the little she has left clasped tight in her hand. Two copper coins. The smallest offering the temple allowed.

And there she waits, quietly, patiently, until it's her time to give.

Nobody else in line looks at her. Perhaps they don't want to make her feel self-conscious. Maybe they don't want to feel that way themselves. Maybe they're just in a hurry. It's Passover ... there's lots to be done. Out of town guests to take care of. And everything takes longer because the roads are clogged with holiday traffic.

For whatever reason, nobody looks at her.

Nobody ... except Jesus.

He sees her standing there, her face seamed from years of squinting at her sewing, her clothes a stitched reminder of better times.

And He waves over His disciples so they can see her too.

The coins in her hand are so small and thin that when she drops them in the coffers, they don't even clink.

In heaven, the silence resounds, one coin the melody, the other the harmony.

But on earth, the sound falls on deaf ears.

Even among the disciples.

In times past, they had been tone deaf to such sounds.

But today, Jesus makes sure they hear, *"I assure you," He said, "this poor widow has given more than all the rest of them. For they have given a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she has."*

It's remarkable, if you stop and think about it. That Jesus stopped. That He noticed. That He took such pleasure in so small a gesture. It would be like the greatest of composers stopping before the crescendo of His greatest symphony. Quieting the orchestra. Cupping his ear to catch the hum of a child in the back row of the concert hall. And applauding.

How beautiful that note must have sounded to Jesus.

What incredible music to His ears.

Music He longed to hear, but seldom did.

Notes like that stopped Jesus, and He gave them not only His attention ...

but His applause.

That's what happened that day at the Temple treasury.

Despite its beauty, how out of place that note seemed when placed beside the strident notes of professional religious hypocrites. Like sitting through a funeral service and hearing the child in front of you humming.

How could you keep from smiling, even in your sadness?

What joy that note must have brought to the Savior.

The widow gave everything she had, although she had **every reason not to**.

Since it was Passover, contributions were at a seasonal high, and so she may have wondered if her donation was even needed.

The religious authorities were corrupt ... Jesus said so Himself ... and who would want any of their hard-earned money going to them?

There was price-gouging going on in the courtyard, and wouldn't it be good stewardship to wait until the exchange rates for temple coins were better?

Besides, look at this place, it's extravagant, is the money really going to be used wisely? Besides, she really needed the money.

A lot more than the temple needed it.

Who would blame her for keeping it?

But she didn't keep it.

She **gave** it. **All** of it. And the all that she gave she gave **away**.

Without expecting anything in return.

Without trying to direct how any of it was spent.

Without thought of being noticed.

Without thought of even being thanked.

Her gift may not have meant a lot to the temple.

But it meant a lot **to God**.

Because those two little coins represented not only her faithfulness in supporting God's work, but her faith that **God** would support her.

A day at a time. A meal at a time. A prayer at a time.

That's how she lived.

And that's why it meant so much.

And that's why the Savior, on His way to making the most costly sacrifice, stopped to **honor** such a small gift.

Let's go back to verse 1 and ...

v. 1-2: JESUS OBSERVATIONS²

² The description of widows and what their life must have been like is taken from The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 5, pages 928-929 and Commentary on the Gospel of Luke by Frederick Godet, page 256. The description of the coins is taken from The Gospel According to St. Mark

What did Jesus see as He watched the worshipers make their deposits?

Initially “*He watched the rich people putting their gifts into the collection box.*” We shouldn’t assume that He disapproved of all the offerings of the rich. Very likely there were some who had the right motivation.

But Jesus also saw much that displeased Him.

Public giving, such as this setting required, promotes self-conscious promotion — like the man who stood up in a meeting where they were taking donations and said, “I want to give \$100 — anonymously.”

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 standing beside crippled children?

The huge Passover crowds and the public display made possible by the thirteen trumpets created an opportunity for outrageous exhibition of affluence and importance. Imagine the hush that came over the crowd when a prominent person approached, perhaps with an offering too heavy to carry by himself, and the audible gasp as the shekels crashed into the brass trumpets.

Can you see the pious look of the rich givers, their satisfied, restrained “see if you can top that” expressions?

The rich, fashionable religious world of Jerusalem paraded before Jesus’ eyes. It was a world of souls in peril. The ability to give on a scale not possible for other people can produce delusions of superiority and spiritual safety ... “I have done what others cannot — so my soul is superior and my eternity secure.” Such people can develop a sense of intrinsic goodness, when they are, in fact, **evil**.

But as Jesus watched, He noticed something that made His heart applaud, verse two, “*Then a poor widow came by and dropped in two pennies.*”

Jesus, and anyone else who happened to see her, knew she was a poverty-stricken widow because widows wore distinctive clothing, in her case probably worn and tattered. The life of widows in Biblical times was pretty difficult.

The beauty of this woman’s soul makes us wonder where she lived and how, and what had been her suffering. Her offering was two coins, so small they were called *lepta* (literally, “peeled” or “fine,” the idea being a tiny thin coin). The miniature *lepton* was worth only one four-hundredth of a shekel, or about one-eighth of a cent. The two *lepta* represented barely anything — like today’s pennies that most people don’t even bother to pick up.

She undoubtedly approached the trumpets quietly, almost silently, head bowed, hoping to draw no attention to herself. Though she didn’t know Jesus was watching, she knew God saw her, and that’s whom she came to please.

Seen in the context of the greed of the teachers of the Law who were devouring widows' houses, her gift unintentionally slammed the religious establishment.

Her motivation for such giving could only be love. There is **no other** plausible explanation. She (not the religious leaders) was living out the *Shema*, the summary of Old Testament Law found in **Deuteronomy 6:4-5**, which says, "*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.*"

She loved God with all she was and with all she had. When she slipped the two coins into the mouth of the "trumpet," they fell too softly to be heard against the shekels of the rich. The temple was, in effect, no richer, but she was immeasurably poorer, for she had given all she had!

She was silently saying to God, "I love you. Here's my heart, here's my life. It's not much, but it's all I have."

The Passover crowd had been oohing and aahing over the generosity of the rich, and Jesus had remained unmoved. But when the widow passed by, though He sat still, inwardly He was on his feet applauding. This widow was a rare flower in a desert of official devotion, and her beauty made His heart rejoice.

And Jesus wasn't going to let the moment pass unnoticed.

v. 3-4: **JESUS' APPLICATIONS**³

"I assure you," He said, "this poor widow has given more than all the rest of them. For they have given a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she has."

Jesus held in His hands the balance scales of eternity.

On one side He emptied all the contents of the thirteen trumpets — the shekels, the denarii, the heavy gold and silver.

On the other side he placed the two minuscule copper coins.

And the massive load of the rich gave way to the eternal weight of the widow's small offerings.

An old preacher named John Calvin correctly saw Jesus' words as double-edged, encouraging to those who have little, but a sobering exhortation to those who have much.

He remarks, "The lesson is useful in two ways. The Lord encourages the poor, who appear to lack the means of doing well, not to doubt that they testify to their enthusiasm for Him even with a slender contribution. If they consecrate

³ John Calvin quote comes from his book *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke and the Epistles of James and Jude*, Volume 3, page 72. Joseph Parker quote is taken from *The Gospel According to Luke* by G. Campbell Morgan, page 235. C. S. Lewis quote comes from his book *Mere Christianity*, page 67.

themselves, their offering which appears mean and trivial will be no less precious than if they had offered all the treasures of Croesus. On the other hand, those who have a richer supply and stand out for their large giving are told that it is not enough if their generosity far exceeds the commoners and the underprivileged, for with God it rates less for a rich man to give a moderate sum from a large mass, than for a poor man to exhaust himself in paying out something very small.”

Realizing that Jesus’ commendation cuts both ways calls for some soul-searching observations.

- **First, when giving, the posture of our hearts makes all the difference.**

When I write a check to the I.R.S., that agency doesn’t care about my heart’s attitude. It doesn’t care whether I give willingly or grudgingly, lovingly or hatefully, joyfully or sadly. All the I.R.S. is interested in is the bottom line. Just pay up! Not so with the Lord! The world sees the quantity, but the Lord sees quality. As **1 Corinthians 13:3** says, *“If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”* (NIV)

But if I give a penny with the widow’s heart, it is great gain to me and to God. God weighs our motivations. This truth is either a comfort to you or a terror to you. It’s important to realize ... which way does it strike you?

- **Second, giving that pleases God is giving that costs us.**

We must give in such a way that we go without something we would like to hang on to — travels not taken, clothing and cars that wait another season, pleasures put off. One old English preacher, Joseph Parker, made this unflinching declaration, “The gold of affluence which is given because it is not needed, God hurls to the bottomless pit; but the copper tinged with blood He lifts and kisses into the gold of eternity.”

Centuries earlier, King David said it all in response to the Jebusites generous offer of a threshing floor as a site on which to build an altar to God, as well as the animals to sacrifice there. David answered, **2 Samuel 24:24**, *“No, I insist on buying it, for I cannot present burnt offerings to the Lord my God that have cost me nothing.”*

Giving that costs us is giving that pleases God.

C. S. Lewis offers this wise advice, “I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.”

- **Third, God can do great things with tiny offerings.**

Those two pennies (together totaling a quarter of a cent), given quietly with the widow's motive, have produced more for the kingdom in the intervening 2,000 years than all the other gifts presented that Passover week.

Down through the ages those two little coins have been multiplied into billions and billions for God's work as humble people have been liberated to give from either their little or their much. The Lord has converted those two coins into a perennial wealth of instruction and motivation for His Church.

If there is love and sacrifice on the part of the giver, there will be spiritual power in the gift. In this respect we can say that what the church needs is not larger gifts, but gifts given with the sacrificial attitude of the poor widow. Jesus meant to encourage all of us with his commendation of this godly woman.

- **Fourth, at the Judgment, Christ will square His accounts.**

There is no evidence that the woman ever knew what Jesus thought of her gift. There is no evidence that she ever became a prosperous woman in this life. The final Judgment of Christ is going to reveal her work — the architecture of a beautiful soul adorned with gold, silver, and precious stones.

The memory of the widow's giving stayed with Jesus as He went from the temple to the judgment hall to the Mount of Calvary. She, to use His words, "*poor as she is, has given everything she has.*" Someday He is going to say to her, "I saw what you did!" The crown of our sister the widow will be glorious!

- **Fifth, God is perfectly "equal opportunity."**

There is no advantage to the poor or the rich, to the ignorant or the educated, to the unknown or the well known in the matter of giving. Billy Graham has no advantage over the humblest believer, and vice versa.

The questions are:

How do we give? Grudgingly or willingly?

Does our giving cost us anything?

What will the Judgment reveal?

What is our attitude when we are not being watched?

CLOSING REFLECTIONS: *Is this really possible?*

Is it really possible for the Church to love and give like the widow?

Has it ever given like that?

The history of the apostolic church answers with a resounding yes!

The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians, **2 Corinthians 8:1-5**, "*Now I want to tell you, dear brothers and sisters, what God in His kindness [grace] has done for the churches in Macedonia. [2] Though they have been going through much trouble and hard times, their wonderful joy and deep poverty have overflowed in rich generosity. [3] For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford but far more. And they did it of their own free will. [4] They begged us again and*

again for the gracious privilege of sharing in the gift for the Christians in Jerusalem. [5] Best of all, they went beyond our highest hopes, for their first action was to dedicate themselves to the Lord and to us for whatever directions God might give them.”

God does not want our money.

He wants us.

And yet we cannot give ourselves to Him **apart** from our money.

It is true that money talks.

It tells us where our hearts are.

Jesus sits across from the treasury of every church and watches.

What does He see in this church?

And what does He see in your life?

And all God's people said, "***Amen.***"

Oh Lord,

Give us such a stillness of soul that even in the noisiest of days we would hear the notes that bring pleasure to your ears.

Thank You for that poor widow's gift.

And for noticing it.

Thank You for ennobling her devotion with Your attention. For giving her a place of honor not only in Your eyes but in the eyes of Your disciples. And not only in theirs but in every eye of every century that has ever read your Word and seen her standing there, so quietly, so patiently.

Help us, Lord, to learn the lesson of her life: That no matter how small the gift or how uncertain tomorrow may seem without it clutched in my hand, that the more freely I give today, the more fully I'll trust You tomorrow.

In Jesus' Name,
Amen.