

The Hypocrisy of Wealthy Givers and the Humility of a Poor Widow

Mark 12:38-44

Mark 12:38-44 – *“Then He said to them in His teaching, “Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, ³⁹ the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation.”*

⁴¹ Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. ⁴² Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. ⁴³ So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; ⁴⁴ for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood.”

Background Notes

In verse 38, the “them” is the common people mentioned in verse 37 - the multitudes. The Lord told the crowd of followers to “beware of the scribes and Pharisees” - the religious leaders of that day. Only the scribes were mentioned here, but in the parallel account in Matthew 23, the Pharisees were mentioned as well. The Lord told the people to beware of the scribes and Pharisees because they were self-righteous hypocrites. They were phonies! They looked and sounded pious, but it was all an ostentatious and pretentious show.

In Numbers 15, according to the Law, Jewish men were to wear a fringe on the border of their garments. There’s nothing wrong with that, but the scribes and the Pharisees wore long flowing robes, and made the tassels very obvious.

These religious leaders loved to go around in ostentatious robes that drew a lot of attention because of the obvious religious fringe. They loved the greetings in the marketplace. They loved the seats in the synagogues up front, facing the people, where everyone could look at them and think that they were especially religious. They loved to give long eloquent prayers - just for show.

Meanwhile, they “*devoured widows’ houses*” (v40)! What’s that all about? The scribes were the lawyers of that day, and they were as clever as some unscrupulous lawyers today. The scribes were not paid for their work as the official interpreters of Old Testament Law, and they had to depend on the generosity of the devout Jews for support.

Unfortunately, they abused this privilege, and with clever legal maneuvering and manipulation, they took advantage of the common people and exploited the poor. They even foreclosed and forced widows out of their homes for their own financial gain. What a contrast between the wealthy and self-righteous scribes, and the poor widow who put her last two coins into the Temple treasury!

The Temple treasury was in the Court of the Women in the Temple Court complex. The treasury consisted of thirteen large brass receptacles with trumpet shaped openings. These thirteen receptacles were designated for different purposes, but they were all part of the Temple treasury. We don't know which receptacle the widow chose, but the Lord observed. He was probably sitting somewhere near the Beautiful Gate, the gate that divided the Court of the Gentiles from the Court of the Women.

The fact that the Lord knew exactly how much the widow put into the treasury, and that He knew it was "all that she had" is another glimpse of our Lord's omniscience.

Doctrinal Points

1. There are degrees of punishment in hell.

Where do we find this doctrine taught in this passage? In reference to the scribes and Pharisees the Lord said, *"Who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation"* (v40). Where will these unbelievers receive *"greater condemnation"*? In hell! There are degrees of punishment in hell.

Other Scriptures indicate this biblical truth. Matthew 11:20-24, in the Lord's condemnation of the Galilean cities: *"Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.'" There are degrees of punishment in hell.*

A further Scripture is Luke 12:45-48. This is our Lord's statement about "professing servants" who are not true believers. *"But if that servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few."*

There are degrees of punishment in hell.

2. God is more interested in the “how” than in the “how much.”

As the Lord watched the people putting money into the Temple treasury, He saw *“how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much.”* The Lord saw a lot of money going into the treasury that day. He didn’t condemn the big givers for their giving, but He took special notice of one poor widow. *“One poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans.”* A quadrans was a fraction of a cent!

The Lord took special notice of that one poor widow, because God is more interested in the “how” than in the “how much.” He’s more interested in **how** a person gives rather than **how much** a person gives. Verse 44 says that the wealthy religious leaders gave to make big impression. They gave a lot, but they gave out of their “abundance.” But the widow gave from the heart. She gave a little - but she gave out of her “poverty”!

The wealthy leaders gave out of their abundance. No pain - just a small percentage off the top. How did the widow give? Out of her **poverty** - she gave all that she had! This was **sacrifice**! She didn’t put one of her coins into the treasury and keep the other for herself. We must admit that’s what most of us would have done. After giving one and keeping one would be giving 50% - a lot more than a tithe! We would consider 50% a very generous percentage!

Not only that, it’s obvious that the widow gave in faith. She was trusting that the Lord would meet her needs because she had given all her livelihood to Him! She put in “all her living”! That’s also part of the “how” that she gave. She gave all to the Lord, trusting the Lord to meet her needs.

God is more interested in the “**how**” than in the “**how much**”!

Practical Applications

1. Let’s not be like the scribes and Pharisees!

With the scribes and Pharisees, there was a pretense of religious piety. Their actions were all a big “show.” They loved the attention and praise of the people. It’s interesting to see the same thing among the orthodox Jews today. If you were to go to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount today, you would observe many ultra-Orthodox Jewish men praying long prayers and reading the Torah for many long hours. Some of them would be wearing large, round, ostentatious fur hats! Believe it or not, these men like you to observe them! They don’t want you to take their pictures, but they don’t mind the attention people pay to their religious activity! Let’s not be like the scribes and Pharisees.

At this point we would all say, “We’re Christians – so obviously we’re not like the scribes and Pharisees!” True. But even true believers can be just like the scribes and Pharisees. What are your motives for serving the Lord? Are you serving the Lord for show, so your name is mentioned in Sunday services, or printed up in the church or ministry brochure? Are you serving the Lord for prestige, like getting to sit at the head table at different functions, or having your picture taken

with the famous guest preacher? Are you giving to the Lord for fame, like having a church hall or building named after you? That's like the scribes and Pharisees!

I must admit that I have to analyze my own motives as a teacher at Emmaus Bible College. Do I really want to serve the Lord and my students by humbly teaching the Word of God at a small school - or do I enjoy having students look up to me as "Dr. Dave, the know-it-all professor"? Is commencement special because of the joy of seeing my students graduating and going on to serve the Lord? Or is it a thrill to wear my flowing academic robe with velvet chevrons and my long multi-colored hood? And why do we want degrees after our names anyway? We constantly have to analyze our attitudes and our motives so we don't become hypocrites, like the scribes and the Pharisees.

I'm sure you can identify and apply this teaching and conviction to your own situation. Let's not be like the scribes and Pharisees!

2. God looks at how much we have left!

This was certainly true in the case of the poor widow. The Lord said that she gave "*all her living.*" She had *nothing* left over! The rich givers, who gave a lot of money, had a lot left over! We always tend to look at how much we (or others) are giving – but God sees how much we have left!

Giving everything is quite a radical concept, but notice that the Lord didn't go over and say to the widow, "Excuse me madam, you shouldn't give everything away! Think about your future needs! Just give one of the coins – 50% would be fine!" The Lord knew her heart of love and He saw her faith. He didn't say she had given "too much"!

Of course, other scriptural principles apply here, and we have to keep these in mind. For example, we're responsible to provide for the financial needs of our families (1 Timothy 5:8). But the Lord did not correct the widow for giving her all. He saw her heart, He knew her faith, and He commended her!

Do you think she starved to death? Certainly not! God saw that she had nothing left, and He took care of her. That's one reason why God looks at how much we have left - so that He can provide for us. He notices how much we have left. How much do you have left? When we look around at the many needs that are out there, we all need to ask ourselves the question: when we give, how much do we have left?

In 2 Corinthians 8 & 9, the churches in Macedonia gave to the Lord "*out of their deep poverty*" and "*beyond their ability*" (8:2-3). As a result, the Lord made a wonderful promise to those faithful and **generous** believers: "*God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having everything that you need, you will abound in every good work*" (2 Corinthians 9:8). Notice all those superlatives! What an amazing promise!

Can we follow their example? God knows how much we have left!