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GIVING THAT PLEASURES THE LORD

Luke 21:1-4

By

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Luke Lesson 95

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Back in the 1980's, Lee Iacocca chaired the fund-raising effort to refurbish the Statue of Liberty. He told about some of the unusual gifts and givers (*Newsweek* [7/7/86], pp. 18-19). One woman in her eighties sent a letter and check for \$10,000. She added a P.S. asking for a free copy of Iacocca's book because there was a two-month wait at the library. Iacocca said, "Now there's a woman after my own heart. She'll give 10 grand for the statue, but she isn't about to go to the bookstore and spend \$19.95 just to read about some Italian kid's ups and downs in the car business. Talk about having your priorities straight!"

Another 87-year-old lady sent \$1,000. They sent her a nice thank-you note. She must have appreciated the note; she sent another check for \$50,000. After that, Iacocca called her to say thanks again, and he invited her to visit Liberty Island with him. But she said she had to clean her house. On two other occasions when he was in New York, Iacocca called her, but she was always too busy. But the last time she refused his date, she said she was sending another "little envelope." When it came, there were three checks—one for \$25,000, one for \$50,000 and one for \$75,000. All he did was try to say thanks for \$1,000 and he ended up with \$201,000! He said, "There's no telling where we'd be if we'd also sent flowers!"

Perhaps the most touching gift came from 78 homeless Vietnamese refugees, living in a camp in Thailand. They passed the hat and came up with \$114.19. These were people who had lost everything but hope. They were willing to give what little they had for that symbol of liberty.

Their gift was probably most like that of this anonymous widow whom Jesus commended. Among the throngs of worshippers in Jerusalem that Passover week, Jesus singled her out as the outstanding example. Haddon Robinson put it, "The gold-medal giver in the New Testament turns out to be a woman who contributed less than a nickel" (*Leadership* [Fall, 1989], p. 93). The small

copper coins (“mites”) she dropped into the treasury box were each worth one sixty-fourth of a denarius, a working man’s daily wage. They were called “lepta,” which literally means “peeled,” because they were such thin coins. But they were “all that she had to live on” (21:4). Her sacrificial giving pleased the Lord and is held up to us as an example for our giving.

I doubt that any of us, myself included, has ever come close to giving what this poor widow gave. People sometimes say, “I’ll give my mite,” but they completely miss the point. We have not given our “mite” until we are down to our last dollar, and we give it. So in looking at this incident, most of us are standing near sea level looking up at this woman on Mount Everest. While we may never get there ourselves, we can learn much from her that will help us please God with our giving. Three lessons:

1. The Lord Jesus observes our giving.

Jesus “looked up and saw” the rich and their gifts. He saw this poor widow and her gift. He still sees every giver and gift!

A. Jesus observes the givers.

There were 13 boxes with brass trumpet-shaped openings, narrow at the top, wider at the bottom, where worshipers could give. Since there was no paper money, you could hear the sound of the coins clinking into those boxes.

There was the sound of the average giver: “Clink, clink, clink, clink.” Every once in a while, a well-dressed scribe would walk up, look around to make sure he was being watched, and dump in a whole bag full of coins: “CLINK, CLINK, CLINK, CLINK, CLINK, CLINK.” And then this poor widow came up. No one noticed her, except the Lord. You had to strain to hear the faint, “Plink, plink.”

The Greek word that Mark 12:41 uses for Jesus’ observing means to gaze or look intently. We get our word “theater” from it. There were many Passover worshipers coming into the Temple that day, dropping their donations into the boxes. Probably none of them noticed Jesus sitting there. But He noticed each one of them, including this anonymous widow. She didn’t know Jesus was watching her until she got to heaven, where she was richly re-

warded. He not only knew how much she gave, but in His omniscience, He even knew that it was all she had to live on.

The same is true today, each time we give to the Lord: He is watching. He doesn't miss a single gift, small or large. He knows every giver, rich and poor. People may give anonymously, not noticed by men. I purposely do not know what anyone in this church gives. But the Lord Jesus knows each one.

We're all guarded about sharing our personal finances with anyone. To ask someone, "How much do you make?" or "How much do you give?" is kind of like asking, "How's your sex life?" It's a very confidential matter. But Jesus knows every dime you make and where you spend it. "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good" (Prov. 15:3).

Years ago, the well-known preacher, John Broadus wanted to impress on his congregation the fact that Jesus knows what we give. So one Sunday he came down off the platform and walked beside an usher as the offering was taken. The pastor went up every aisle and watched as each person either gave or passed the plate by. Some were angry; others were confused or ashamed. All were surprised. He went back to the pulpit and began his sermon on this story. He concluded, "My people, if you take it to heart that I have seen your offerings this day and know just what sacrifice you have made—and what sacrifice you have not made—remember that your Savior goes up the aisles with every usher and sees every cent contributed by His people" ("Our Daily Bread," 5/77).

So the first thing to remember is that Jesus sees those who give. You cannot please Him with your giving if you forget that He is always watching.

B. Jesus observes the amounts given.

Mark 12:41 notes that many rich people were putting in large sums. This widow put in two small copper coins. Jesus saw how much each one gave.

What difference did her two coins make toward meeting the temple budget? None! Perhaps the treasurer muttered under his breath as he counted it, "Why do people throw such small coins into the treasury? They're more a nuisance to count than they're worth!"

But whatever amount we give, we need to consider three things:

- Focus: Whatever we give should be out of love for the Lord, not for self-gratification.

I don't know for sure why this widow gave those two coins that day; the text does not say. But I think that Luke wants us to see a contrast between her and the scribes whom Jesus has just denounced. They were doing their religion to impress others with how spiritual they were. She was quiet, unknown, and not trying to impress anyone. They were giving out of pride, for selfish recognition. She was giving in worship, out of love for God. Whatever amount we give, we should give out of a heart of love for God, not for personal recognition or other selfish reasons.

Many years ago, the Billy Graham organization was celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Los Angeles crusade that launched Graham's ministry into worldwide recognition. A friend of mine who worked for Decision Magazine got me a free ticket to a breakfast where Graham was supposed to speak. As it turned out, he couldn't come, but his wife Ruth was there.

The breakfast was sponsored by a group called the Tennessee Train Committee. They had chartered a train and brought a train-load of people to every Billy Graham Crusade in the lower 48 states for the past 25 years. The program consisted of these men getting up and congratulating one another for all that they had done for the Graham organization over the years. Then with great fanfare they presented Ruth Graham with a check. There must have been at least 200 men, plus their wives. They had spent hundreds of dollars each on the trip to Los Angeles. So I was shocked when they announced that the check was for \$2,000! I thought, "These old geezers should have been able to give that much each! They should have stayed home and sent a check for the amount they spent on their trip!"

God only knows their motives, but it seemed to me that they were giving more for self-gratification and recognition than out of love for God and for lost souls.

- Faith: Whatever we give should be given looking to God to supply all our needs.

Not many of us are as poor as this woman was. Giving away what she had to live on forced her to trust God to meet her needs. But even when we have plenty in the bank for future needs, we should give in faith, looking to God to meet all our needs. Have you ever had the experience of giving to the Lord's work money that you had set aside for some personal need or nicety? Then you prayed, "Lord, would you please provide this item for us?" When He does, it brings great joy to know that you gave in faith and God provided in a way that you never could have imagined.

- Faithfulness: We should give faithfully, no matter what our circumstances.

I don't get the impression that this widow was giving because the chief priest got on his TV show and pled, "If you don't send in your checks, the temple will go under." She wasn't giving because of pressure or impulse. Rather, she gave out of routine faithfulness. When she went to worship at the temple, she gave as a matter of "holy habit."

The widow's gift dislodges the excuse, "We'll give when we get enough money." No, you won't! Giving is a mind-set. If you don't figure out ways to give faithfully when you're poor, you won't give when you've got more. You can always find some way to give something if you have a mind to be faithful to God.

Let's be honest: the reason most of us don't give faithfully is not because we don't have the money. It's because we squandered the money the Lord provided on frivolous stuff that we could easily live without. We run up our credit cards to support a lifestyle we can't afford and then say, "I can't afford to give." But the truth is, we don't give and we're in debt because we aren't managing God's resources carefully in line with His priorities.

I'm going to be blunt and specific: If you are not current on your bills, you cannot afford to go out to dinner, to go to the movies, or to pay for cable TV. You need to cut all nonessentials until you get out of debt, with a savings buffer for emergencies. And the reason is not so that you can then start spending more on yourself. It should be so that you can begin *giving* as the Lord wants you to do. Pretty radical, huh? The Bible is clear that if you

can't give as you should, you're not managing your money as the Lord wants you to do.

So the first lesson is that Jesus observes our giving. He knows how much we make, how much we spend, and how much we give. Keeping that fact in mind would greatly affect our giving and how we manage all that the Lord entrusts to us.

2. The Lord Jesus evaluates our giving.

When the Lord exclaimed, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them," He was evaluating their gifts. Pile up all the gifts of the rich combined on one side and hers on the other. Hers weighs more in God's sight.

Charles Simeon (*Expository Outlines of the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], XII:165) points out that if Jesus had not commended this woman's gift, most of us would have condemned it. He says that it was unnecessary, because surely God wouldn't require a gift from one so poor. It also was useless, since the temple didn't need this pittance. And, it was presumptuous, because to give away everything was to tempt God by giving away what He had already supplied for her basic needs. Why would Jesus speak so highly of her gift? Two reasons:

A. Jesus evaluates the cost of the gift to the giver.

He explains (21:4) that they all gave out of their surplus, "but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on." The gifts of the rich didn't cost them anything. They didn't have to go without anything or adjust their lifestyles to give large amounts. But this widow may have gone hungry that night because she gave.

I fear that most of us give God the leftovers. If we have anything left after we've spent the rest not just for our needs, but also for many nice extras, then we drop a bit in the plate. Or, if it's something old that we don't need, we'll donate it to the church or to missions. Paul Harvey told about a woman who called the Butterball Turkey Company and asked whether she could cook a turkey that had been in her freezer for 23 years. The customer service representative explained that it might be okay if the freezer had maintained a below-zero temperature the whole time, but that the flavor would have deteriorated so much that it wouldn't be very

tasty. The woman said, "Oh, that's what we thought. We'll just donate it to the church."

Even if you tithe, if you make an average wage, it doesn't cost that much. You still have 90 percent to spend on yourself. Ten percent is more like a tip. It's a nice gesture, to show God that you appreciate His services after you've gorged yourself on the gourmet meal He gave you. But it doesn't really cost you. You didn't give up the meal.

The Lord evaluates our giving not by how much we give, but by how much we have left after we give. The more we make, the more percentage-wise we ought to give. Ignoring taxes, a person making \$50,000 who tithes has \$40,000 left to live on. But a person making \$10,000 who tithes has only \$9,000 left. Yet, studies consistently show that lower income people give more proportionately than those who earn more. A 1989 Gallup poll showed that people earning under \$10,000 gave 5.5 percent of their income. Those with \$50,000 to \$60,000 gave 1.7 percent. Those earning between \$75,000 to \$100,000 gave 3.2 percent. That should not be. We all ought to feel the pinch because we've given to the Lord's work. We should not offer to the Lord sacrifices that cost us nothing (2 Sam. 24:24).

B. Jesus evaluates the motive of the giver.

I've already touched on this. I'm inferring it from the context of this story. The Lord knew the selfish motives of the religious leaders who gave large amounts to the temple, but they did it to be honored by men (Matt. 6:1-4). Jesus condemned them for their hypocrisy. But He commended this poor widow, who didn't even know that He saw her give. Jesus knew her motives. She gave to express her devotion to God. It was an act of worship.

God isn't after our money. He's after our hearts. He wants us to love Him first of all. He knows that our hearts are inseparably bound up with our money. As Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). Your heart follows your treasure. If you invest your treasure in stocks, your heart follows the Dow Jones Industrial average. If you invest in God's kingdom, your heart will be drawn to God.

Since the Lord Jesus observes and evaluates our giving, the bottom line is,

3. We must give as unto Him.

Motive means everything in giving. God loves a cheerful giver who gives out of love and gratitude to Him. We shouldn't give out of pressure to meet needs. I would not be honest if I said that the church does not have needs. We're trying to remodel part of the building to serve us better. We'd like to do that debt-free. We hope to hire a college pastor this year, which means more money. We know of some pressing missionary needs and opportunities. But we only make such needs known so that you can know where to direct your giving. We don't want you to give because you feel pressured. We want you to give to the Lord because you have received His indescribable gift.

One day a little girl shopping with her mother saw the most beautiful doll. She wanted it so badly, but they just couldn't afford it. Her daddy had been sick and out of work for several months. Trying not to sound too disappointed, she said, "I know, Mama, I know ... but isn't she beautiful?" Every time they went into that store, the girl would gaze fondly at that doll.

Some months passed. Things got better for the family. The little girl had almost forgotten her dream wish when, to her utter surprise, she got that doll as a birthday gift. From then on, she and the doll were inseparable. It became her "favoritest treasure," as she put it.

One day, while sitting with her parents in church, she listened as the pastor spoke of how much Jesus loves us—how He left His beautiful home in heaven and came down here to die for our sins. All week long the little girl thought about how much Jesus loved her and she wished she could do something to show Him that she loved Him, too. But she only had one penny.

The next Sunday her father and mother couldn't believe it when they saw her take her treasured doll and put it in the offering plate. Some stared and some chuckled as they saw the doll in the offering plate, not realizing the costly sacrifice it represented. Every day the little girl missed her doll, but especially at bedtime.

She would get tears in her eyes, but then she would think about Jesus and it would be all right again.

One evening the pastor dropped by, just for a social call, he said, with the doll tucked under his arm. He smiled warmly and said, "I brought your doll back to you." The little girl seemed transfixed at the sight of that doll. She didn't move. "Go ahead, take her," the pastor said. "I'm giving her back to you."

Only the look in her eyes betrayed how much she wanted to take that doll back in her arms. But, brushing away a tear, she said, "I can't ... I can't take her." "But, why?" asked the startled pastor. "B-b-b-because ... I didn't give her to you." She had given her doll to the Lord.

Conclusion

That's the lesson this poor widow teaches us:

Since the Lord observes and evaluates our giving,
we must give as unto Him.

This widow's giving pictures two things. It shows us how we should respond to the great love of Christ. We must give Him our very hearts, which certainly includes our money. If you're not giving faithfully and generously to the Lord's work, it shows that you don't love Jesus as much as you should.

But it also points us to Christ's total self-giving for us on the cross. As Paul put it, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). He took our sins on Himself so that God could be both loving and just in offering us a complete pardon. To please God with your monetary giving, you must first receive His indescribable gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Then, out of love, give Him your heart. And show it by giving costly gifts to please Him. As J. C. Ryle observed, "A giving Savior ought to have giving disciples" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], Luke 11-24, p. 354).

Discussion Questions

1. How do we know when we've given enough? Must we give so much that we live in poverty?
2. What is your main hindrance when it comes to giving? How can we fight against greed and materialism?
3. "Consistent, generous giving is the best test of spirituality." Agree/disagree?
4. Is it wrong to give when you're in debt? Should we save for the future or give it all away and trust God?

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