

June 12, 2011
 II Corinthians 8:1-15 / Luke 20:1-4
 Riches, Giving and the Poor Widow's Offering

Today we come to another of the most well-known and precious texts in the entire Bible: The account of the poor widow putting her two lepta (or "two mites" as the KJV puts it) into the collection chests, which stood in a very prominent and visible place near the entrance of the Temple.

And even though it's a very short text, it speaks volumes in regard to God's attitude toward our giving. That is, giving to the ongoing support of the Temple ministry in Jerusalem (though it can equally apply to the ongoing support of any church).

And as I begin, I want you to KNOW this is the FIRST TIME in my entire 25 years as a pastor that I have ever preached an entire sermon devoted solely to the topic of giving! I have made passing references to it as I preached on other texts, but this is the first ever sermon devoted entirely to giving!

In fact, about 9 nine years ago (in one of my seminary classes in Orlando) I mentioned (in a somewhat boastful way) to another student (who was also a pastor) how I had been in the ministry (at that time) for 16 years, and had NEVER ONCE in all those years ever preached a sermon on giving.

"Why not?" he asked. "Because," I said, "whenever a pastor preaches on giving, people always think he wants a raise! 😊 / "Plus," I added, "if people love the Lord they'll give generously toward His work, and if they don't they won't, pressuring and badgering them will do little good -- at least when it comes to having the right attitude when they do give."

Now I expected him to say: *"Wow! You've always made budget without ever preaching on giving?!"* But he didn't! Instead, with a tone of rebuke in his voice, he said: ***"Then you have done your people a great disservice. Because isn't learning to give generously to the Lord's work just as much a vital part of Christian discipleship and their spiritual formation as learning to pray / and study the Word / and resist sin?"***

And then he asked me a good question: ***"If you wouldn't neglect preaching on the need to do all those other things, because they're Scriptural mandates, why would you do so when it comes to the mandate of giving to support the ministry & outreach of the local church?"*** I had no good answer.

He was right. It was a rebuke that pointed out my pastoral deficiency in that area. And though it's taken me almost a decade to remedy it(!) (since I try to limit my messages to what each text specifically addresses) I'm going to preach my ***FIRST EVER COMPLETE SERMON*** on the topic of giving to the local church. I have to, since that's what this text is about!

And I'll do so by addressing the FOUR major issues that arise and can be discerned from this text: Our desperate NEED to give / our desperate need to give GENEROUSLY / what our ATTITUDE should be when we give / and then I'll end with the 7 KEYS to generous giving.

And since there's a lot to cover, let's get right into it, starting **FIRST** with our desperate NEED to give. As I mentioned before, this text is one of the most precious and well-known texts in the Gospels. But it's also one of the most misused.

For instance, I once got into a conversation with one particular man from New England (who appeared relatively well-to-do). And after discovering I was a pastor, he informed me that he no longer attended church because (quote), *"All they ever do is ask for money."* I hear that one ALL the time!

He even brought up this text and said: *"God doesn't care how much you give. The old lady in the Gospels gave two pennies and Jesus thought that was great."*

And realizing that he was using this text as an excuse to be cheap and suggest that God is pleased with trivial offerings to His church, I couldn't help but tell him that Jesus wasn't applauding her for giving two pennies, he was applauding her because all she had to live off were two pennies, and she gave it all to the church! She gave everything she had, even though it was only two small pennies. And there's a BIG difference!

That's what people often fail to see in this text. Here is a woman who has virtually nothing. She would be counted among the poorest in all Israel. She has only two lepta to her name. The name "lepta" means "shaved, peeled or fine." It was a coin much thinner than an American dime (maybe one third the thickness, though about the same diameter). A coin that was valued at 1/100th of a shekel (or in U.S. currency -- 1/8 of one penny)!

It weighed next to nothing and would barely have made a sound going into the offering chest. And the two coins together equaled a whopping value of one quarter of one penny!

Yet, she so loved her God, that even despite her great poverty, she gave everything she had to support the Temple ministry. "***Out of her poverty,***" says the watching Jesus, "***she put in ALL she had to live on.***"

And notice: Although Jesus sees her there in her dirty tattered clothes / giving to the support of people who were surely more well-off than she was / not only let's her throw her last two lepta into the chest (without running over / and trying to stop her / or telling her to take it out and use it for her own needs) He praises her for doing so (even though it would have surely meant she's have none left to buy food for that night or the next day).

And LISTEN: Contrary to what my friend from New England was trying to suggest -- He doesn't praise her for giving a small offering (thus showing that small offerings are fine)! / He praises her because even though it was small, it was everything she had to live off! He praises her because for her it was a HUGE offering! "***MORE,***" says Jesus, "***than all the others***" -- at least percentage-wise. Like a millionaire giving ALL his millions.

You see, THIS IS NOT A TEXT ABOUT TITHING (or giving 10% of one's income to the Lord's work). It's about giving 100%!

It's a text about being so generous that it hurts! / Giving so much that we actually have to go without things we'd like or even need -- like her need for food that day.

Yet you know what? Despite the hardships this widow would have incurred as a result, Jesus doesn't stop her from putting in her last two coins!

It seems so un-Jesus-like! So why does He let her? There seems to be only one good explanation: Jesus let's her give it all because it helped HER as a child of God to give generously. / Though having next to nothing / and being able to do little else to support the work of God / it actually helped her (to use Paul's words in II Cor. 8) **"to excel in the grace of giving."**

What was said of the Macedonians years later, could be said of her: **"Out of the most severe trial, her overflowing joy and extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."** / He lets her give because it enriched her soul. / It added beauty to the Fruit of the Spirit in her life. / And it went a long way to and increase the treasure she was laying up for herself in heaven!

That's what we sometimes forget. In fact, that's what my minister friend, who rebuked me for not preaching on giving, was telling me. We don't give because God needs our money! He **"owns the cattle on a thousand hills!"** He owns everything! It all belongs to Him!

No. The reason we give is because it's good for us. Because our hearts and souls desperately need to learn to **"excel at the grace of giving!"** I don't care how POOR a person is / or how RICH a person is / or where they fall between those two extremes, EVERYONE needs the life-transforming benefits that only come to them as they learn to give freely / and generously / and joyfully / to the work of God.

Spurgeon was right when he said: "Many people will always be poor, because they never give to the cause of God" (and he didn't mean "poor" in the monetary sense)! He meant that the refusal to give generously to the Lord keep people locked in the shackles of greed / and selfish-self-interest / and being cheap / or miserly / or tight-fisted -- attitudes that impoverish the soul & spoil the fruit of godliness.

You see, just as there are some things that can't be learned apart from suffering / And others that can't be learned apart from commitment / or self-discipline /

or stepping out in faith to take risks / So also there are others that cannot be internalized until we learn to give generously and regularly -- regardless of how poor we are / or may feel we are.

In fact, if we take this passage to heart, it would imply that there is no one that should not be encouraged to give generously. I don't care how poor a person is, they still need to learn to give. Because there's a blessedness that comes from giving which can't be received any other way / and exceeds (according to Jesus) the blessing we receive by receiving.

LISTEN: The Temple was obviously no richer because of her gift. But she was! That's the whole point (even though she was poorer, financially). She has been more of an inspiration to generous giving down through the ages than those who have given one million dollars out of their one billion!

Then **SECONDLY**, we must realize that we have a desperate need in our soul not just to give, but to give GENEROUSLY. Because generosity, like love, joy, peace and patience, is actually one of the evidences of a truly regenerate heart or a godly life. Psalm 37:21 says "***The RIGHTEOUS give generously.***" And Prov. 21:26 says, "***The RIGHTEOUS give without sparing.***"

Which leads us to ask the question: What constitutes being "generous?" Or, How much is enough in terms of giving?

And here I know there are many different opinions about how much is enough! Believe me when I say I've had innumerable "discussions" about this with both pastors and parishioners!

I have some friends who are staunch advocates of the "tithe." They meticulously (with tax return and calculator in hand!) give 10% of their income to the church. / Some of them to the point of being a bit legalistic about it (as with one church in Honduras that actually tracked its people's income (as I believe the Mormons still do).

Yet, adherence to the tithe, though making things simple, raises other questions! Like should it be 10% of one's gross pay / or 10% of their take home pay (most people I know falling into the second category). Though either one would actually

be an enormous increase in giving since recent studies show that the average evangelical only gives 2.5% of their income (less than many spend on dog food, cable, alcohol, eating out).

Others (like Gary Friesen) point out (I believe correctly) that the "tithe" in the OT was not simply 10%, but amounted to about 22% of a person's annual income. **"There is evidence,"** he says, **"that the Hebrews were required to bring not one, but probably two, and possibly three tithes."**

The first tithe was 10% of one's possessions. These were given to be used for the support of the active priesthood (Lev. 27:30-33). / Then there was the second tithe which was taken from whatever produce remained after the primary tithe was given. This tithe was set aside for a sacred meal in Jerusalem (Deut. 12:17-18). / And then last, there was a third tithe collected every third year for the welfare of retired Levites, strangers, orphans and widows (Deut. 14:28-29). Each Jewish family, then, **"was obligated [under the law] to surrender approximately 22% of their annual income for spiritual and social purposes."**

And that's not counting the regularly collected free-will offerings which were above and beyond that! / And when I point out that the tithe was that high, some who preach a staunch and strict tithe baulk! That's a big difference!

And though I understand the argument that says Melchizedek gave Abraham the tithe before God ever gave the "law" given to Israel / and thus, since it preceded the law it should also continue now that the law has been fulfilled in Christ, I humbly disagree... for two reasons:

Because whether or not it was offered to Abraham BEFORE the law was given / it was obviously incorporated into the social and ceremonial law which Christ fulfilled and freed us from / and more importantly, because the tithe is never even mentioned or referenced in relation to NT giving.

So, if the NT standard of giving is not the "tithe," then what is it? And my answer? It's generosity given by a heart that's been touched by the grace of God / and so liberated and transformed by that grace / that it wants to give generously -- often far more than the tithe (whether it be 10% or 22%).

In speaking of the **"rich generosity"** shown by the Macedonians, Paul explicitly states in II Cor. 8:3: ***"I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own (that is, not because Paul pressured them or the law required them to do so, but totally on their own) they urgently pleaded with us for this privilege of sharing in this service to the saints... So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring to completion this act of grace on their part. So just as you excel in everything -- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us -- see that you also excel in this GRACE of giving."***

That (I believe) is what the NT advocates. Not a strict and legalistic adherence to the OT tithe, but ***"excelling in the grace of giving"*** / or simply, ***"grace giving."*** Which, at least in this case, would seem to exceed a tithe!

Paul tells us in II Cor. 8-9 that our giving is a "privilege" (8:4) / That it should always be generous and not sparing (9:6) / given cheerfully and not begrudgingly (9:7) / Not because we feel forced / or pressured / or guilted into it by the "law," but something we should want to do (8:4).

We should do it with extreme generosity (9:6 and 11) / enthusiasm (8:17 and 9:2) / and cheerfulness (9:7) / and always in keeping with the degree that God has blessed or prospered us (9:10-11). / And we are to give it simply because God has been so gracious to us (8:17).

In fact, one man paraphrased Paul's words -- ***"Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly," this way: "Give to God according to your income, lest God make your income according to your giving."***

(Could it be that the economic woes in the U.S. are God's way of making our income more in line with our giving or the sparing way we sow unto God?)

Which means that as our income level increases, so also should the percent-age we give -- from 10% (which would be a good minimum) to 20 % or 30% or 40% or more! As our income increases, the percent we give (and not just the percent we spend) should increase in keeping with it.

After all, if we go by the traditional view of the tithe, instead of grace giving, one man, with a family of four, could make \$20,000/yr, tithe on that \$20,000, and have to live on \$18,000, which would put him in grave financial straits. Whereas another man with a family of four, making \$500,000/yr, and tithing on that, would have \$450,000 to live on after his tithe - meaning he could live in any one of his many houses, or drive any one of his 3-4 cars, without a care in the world!

In the first man's case a strict adherence to the tithe would be evidence of deep devotion to Christ, possibly causing considerable financial hardship that would cut deeply into his lifestyle. / While in the second man's case adhering strictly to the tithe could actually be an insult to God -- pocket change that would do nothing whatsoever to affect his lifestyle in the slightest way.

That's why R.G. LeTourneau, (who founded Letourneau College) reversed the tithe when he began making his millions, giving away 90% of his income and living on only 10%.

Because he understood (as Jesus points out in today's passage) that when one prospers, and their wealth becomes extraordinarily high, the traditional tithe actually displays a lack of devotion, rather than an act of devotion (which is why LeTourneau, Wesley, Spurgeon, Calvin and others saw the need to give far, far more than a simple tithe).

Therefore, C. S. Lewis (as usual) is probably right when he gives 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 [unbelievers] 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 would say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do, because our charitable expenditure excludes them."

I agree with C. S. Lewis. There is no specific percentage given in the NT. And rightly so, for it should get bigger as God prospers us! / 10% is a good minimum, but as we've already seen we should NEVER limit it to that.

As God prospers us, and the percentage should increase in keeping with it. The **LAST** we come to the 7 necessary KEYS to generous giving. Things that must be present in a person's heart if they are ever to be able to do what both Jesus and Paul encourage. So, got your pencils ready?!

1st) You must be a person of faith. Because giving is a matter of believing. A matter of believing that God will supply. It's a matter of believing in His Name! The name "**Jehovah Jireh**" which means, "The Lord Provides."

It's a matter of trusting that He who promised "to supply all our needs in accordance with His glorious riches in Christ Jesus," will indeed do so!
If you believe it you will give generously, if you do not you will not.

And I will not lie to you and tell you that, "*If you give generously to God's work, He will make you rich financially.*" He WILL make you rich (II Cor. 9:11) but those "riches" (as Paul makes clear in II Cor. 8:9, Eph. 1:7, 18, 2:7, 3:8, 3:16 and Phil 4:19) will be spiritual riches, as you display the fruit of a inner spirit liberated from the love of money or a bondage to things.

2ndly) We become generous givers only when we learn to give God the "firstfruits." If there is anything the Old and New Testament make clear, it is that God and His glory and His kingdom and His work come *FIRST* (not second, third or last). And the same is true for our giving -- we are to give Him the firstfruits / and the best fruits / not the leftovers.

No one will ever be "generous" who waits till the end of the month to see what they have left before they give. When we get paid, the *FIRST* check we write out should be our offering to God. Not our mortgage / car payment / rent or credit card balance, but our check for God and His work. He is to get the "**first fruits.**" Scripture makes that exceedingly clear!

3rd) We will be generous givers ONLY when we learn to REGULARLY INCREASE the percentage of our giving in accordance with His blessing. It's far too easy to leave our giving at one fixed amount for years, even though God's blessings have increased significantly during that same time.

4th) We will only become generous givers when we first give Him ourselves. Many people hold back on giving generously to God from their finances,

because they have yet to give their hearts fully to Him. In II Cor. 8:5 Paul shares the key to generous giving when he says of the Macedonians: ***"They gave themselves FIRST to the Lord..."***

5th) We will only become generous givers when we realize that God's ultimate purpose in our lives is not to make us rich, but to make us godly. We need to stop looking at life through the lens of American culture and start looking at life through the lens of the Bible!

God's primary purpose for our lives is to make us holy and blameless and Christ-like, not rich and comfortable and prosperous or pampered. Until we believe that we will never be generous.

6th) We will never be generous until we realize God sees and finds pleasure in our giving. This widow did not know that Jesus was watching her, and as far as we know, she never found out that He used her as an example of extreme generosity.

Yet it didn't matter. For she wasn't doing it to be praised by people! She was doing it to please her heavenly Father. And its only when we give to Him, out of a desire to please Him, and Him alone, that we will be generous.

7th) We will never be generous until we see that our generosity pleases God, because it's a very accurate gage of our love for Him. One of the truest hallmarks of love is the willingness to sacrifice for a person -- time, energy, resources, wants, desires, and yes, money. / ***"Money speaks,"*** as the old saying goes. What we do with it says a lot about us. As R. Kent Hughes points out, ***"Giving reveals the state of the heart as few other things can."***

So, in the end what does it really boil down to? Whether or not a person truly loves God. I may have been dead **wrong** in not preaching on the need to give / or give generously to the church (for it is a vital part of discipleship like all the rest).

But I was very much in the **right** when I said: ***"If a person loves the Lord they will give generously to support the work of His church, and if they do not they won't."*** It's that simple, and it applies regardless of whether someone is rich / or like this widow, dirt poor.