

Should You Give Your Last 2 Pennies?

Jesus' Last Days (Mark): Part 16
Mark 12:41-44 (Lk.21:1-4) 5/8/2021

Is the widow who gave everything an example we should follow? If so, why are we not all giving everything in the offering?

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Mark 12:41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. **42** But one poor widow came and put in two leptas, worth only a quadrans. **43** Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. **44** They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything-- all she had to live on."

Introduction

The teachers of the law had backed away from Jesus in the crowded, Passover temple court, but they were still there, behind the crowd, glaring at Jesus. Fuming. Plotting. Once in a while Jesus looks their way, and they shoot daggers back at him. They know better now than to try to engage Jesus publicly again, but they want to stay within earshot to hear what he's telling the crowd.

He finished his teaching, now the crowd around him is finally dispersing. "Good. It's about time. Now will he leave?" They watch. He doesn't leave. Instead, he makes his way into the treasury area where people gave their offerings. They had 13 different receptacles, each one labeled with what those gifts would go to. All of them were for the Temple in one way or another—building, maintenance, supplies, etc. They also had a system for giving to help the poor, but that was a different system. This area was for giving to support the Temple.

So they watch Jesus move into this area. "Is Jesus going to give an offering? That would be nice. If the people see him put something in, giving will go way up."

"Oh, doesn't look like he's putting anything in. He's just ... sitting there."

Mark 12:41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury.

He takes a break from teaching and just does a little people watching. That's a little ominous. "Why is that ominous?"

I'll explain why it's ominous in a minute, but first let's look at what Jesus sees as he watches the people giving their offerings.

41 ... Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42 But one poor widow came and threw in two leptas, worth only a quadrans.

You've heard this story referred to as "The Widow's Mite"—that comes from the old King James Bible. They translate the word "lepta" as "mite" because back in the 1600's they had coins called mites. This is also the origin of the saying, "Putting in your two cents." The NIV says they were worth only a fraction of a penny, so people in our culture think of this as being two pennies.

Leptas were kind of like pennies in that it was their smallest denomination. It was worth 1/64th of a denarius, and a denarius was one day's wage for a day laborer. In our culture a day laborer would make over \$100, but if we figure a day's wage as \$64, then a lepta would be exactly one dollar. So it might be a little more like saying she put in her last \$2, rather than her last 2 pennies, but either way, she gave everything. The NIV says, in v.44, "all she had to live on"—the word he uses refers to anything of earthly value. She gave everything she had that was of any earthly value.

43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything-- all she had to live on."

The Traditional Interpretation: A Lesson on Giving

So what's the purpose of this passage? The traditional interpretation, which enjoys almost universal agreement, is that this is a lesson on giving. Jesus just wanted to take a break from talking about the Temple and give us a quick little object lesson on sacrificial giving. Nestled here in the middle of all this rhetoric about how the Temple authorities will be punished most severely and the Temple itself will be destroyed lies a nice heart-warming story about a poor widow who gave her all. And the lesson for us is that we should follow her example and give sacrificially.

Almost every sermon I listened to on this passage said, "This amazing woman set the standard for giving. If this poor widow can give every last penny she had to live on, surely you can dig a little deeper and help out the church building fund. You don't have to give your whole life savings like she did, but you can at least give a large, sacrificial gift to the church."

Problems with the Traditional Interpretation

Everyone seems happy with that interpretation. But in order to be happy with it, it seems to me you have to ignore some glaring problems.

The Bible Doesn't Support Giving all Your Money away

The most obvious one is when they say, "This woman is our model, but you don't have to do what she did. All you have to do is put a large, sacrificial gift in the plate." Think through the logic of that. Why do we think what this woman did was exemplary? Did Jesus say it was exemplary? No. Did he say it was good? No. All he said was that it was *more*—she gave more than the others. She gave more because she gave a higher percentage.

"Well, maybe that's just Jesus' way of giving a compliment. Maybe when Jesus wants to praise someone, he keeps it really subtle and vague rather than just coming right out with a direct statement like, "What this woman did was good." Is that possible? If only there were another woman that did some exemplary action that we could use to compare Jesus' reaction. Oh, wait—there is. And it's one that Mark *wants* us to compare to this one. We know that because of where he placed it.

Mark is famous for putting bookends around a story that inform us about the story—like when he put the healing of a blind man at the beginning and end of the whole section on spiritual blindness in ch.8-10. Chapter 13 is the Olivet Discourse, and the two bookends surrounding that sermon are two stories about a woman who gave an extraordinary gift, followed by a comment from Jesus. So let's jump ahead to that

second woman and look at Jesus' comments about her. Because we're wondering—is Jesus able to make it clear when he wants us to know a woman giving a gift did the right thing?

Take a look at Mark 14. In v.3 the woman comes and gives her gift, then Jesus makes his comment about her in v.6. Listen carefully and see if you can pick up on any clues as to whether Jesus wants us to think of her action as good or bad.

6 ... She has done a beautiful thing to me.

That's pretty clear. But he's not done.

8 She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.

Wow. That's really remarkable because Jesus has explained about his death multiple times in crystal clear language, but none of the disciples understood or believed it, and now this woman understands it so well she's anointing his body for burial. This woman has more insight than all the Apostles. But Jesus still isn't done.

9 I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.

What she did was beautiful, it was timely, it was fitting, it was insightful, she surpassed the Apostles, she did what she could, and then this amazing promise that wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, this woman will be honored in the telling of this story forever.

Okay, so that gives us an idea of how it sounds when Jesus praises someone. Does Jesus say any of that about the widow? "What she did was beautiful," "She did what she could," "She'll be honored forever"? No. He just says she gave more than the rich people.

Someone might argue, "Jesus doesn't have to tell us that's good thing—of course it's a good thing. Obviously, it's always better to give more, right?" Is it? Is more always better when it comes to giving money? Regardless of motives, regardless of what your attitude is, just a strict scale, the higher the percentage the better the gift? So the best gift of all is 100% even if you are going to either become a burden to others or just go home and die of starvation?

Did Jesus give 100% of his money to the Temple? No. He kept enough in their fund so that he and the 12 could eat. In fact, they had enough money that they needed a treasurer—Judas. And there was enough money in their purse that Judas could be stealing from it without anyone even noticing.

If 100% is the standard for giving, why didn't Jesus give 100%? And why did Jesus tell the people in Mt.23:23 that they should give 10%? For that matter, why did God set up the tithe in the first place? If he wants us to give 100%, why throw us off by telling us 10%? And why did Paul tell the Corinthians to set aside a portion on the first day of every week in keeping with their income? (1 Corinthians 16:2) Why didn't he just say, "Set it *all* aside"? And if Jesus wanted people to give 100% to support the Temple, what about giving to the poor? That would leave zero for supporting the poor.

It's true that one time Jesus told a man to sell everything (the rich young ruler), but that was a unique instance in which Jesus was testing one man's faith, much like when God told Abraham to sacrifice his son. We don't take that to be a model for all of us, that we all have to kill our sons on an altar. It was a specific test in a specific situation. Plus, Jesus told that man to give to the poor, not to the Temple treasury.

The 100% giving model just doesn't square with the rest of Scripture, it's not how Jesus lived, and there's nothing in this passage that indicates it's the model for us. Jesus never says what this widow did was good, he never says what the rich people did was bad or that they didn't give enough—all he says is she gave more than they gave. And that brings me to the other glaring problem with the traditional interpretation—the fact that Jesus differentiated the widow from the rich people.

Inconsistent Application

For the sake of argument, let's say the traditional view is correct. Let's say Jesus is holding this widow up as a model for the rest of us. How do we know she's a model? We have one bit of evidence to go on—the fact that Jesus differentiated what she did from what the rich people did. That's the only thing we can point to if we want to argue that what she did was good—the fact that it was different from what the rich people did.

How much did the rich people give? According to v.41, they gave “**large amounts**.” Those rich people did the wrong thing by giving large amounts that fell short of 100%; she did the right thing by giving 100%. And so what's the application for us?

Every sermon you hear on this passage ends the same way: “We're not asking you to give everything. Just give a lot. Give **large amounts**.” In other words, be like those rich people.

So here's the traditional interpretation in a nutshell: The widow did the right thing! “How do we know that?” Because she didn't do what those rich scoundrels did. Therefore, you should do what the rich scoundrels did, and not what the widow did. I don't know if I'm just slow or what, but I struggle to see how that follows logically.

What does the passage say about the right amount to give? Nothing. So what are the problems with taking this passage as a lesson on giving?

- It doesn't fit the context
- It never gets around to telling us anything about who gave the right way, who gave the wrong way, or how we should give
- It says nothing about attitude or motive
- The application ends up being, “Jesus praised this widow for doing X instead of Y, therefore we should follow her example, except we should do Y instead of X.”¹

I'm starting to think maybe the traditional interpretation isn't quite right. Maybe this isn't a random, out-of-context, vague, self-contradictory lesson on giving. But if not, then what is it? What *is* the purpose of this story?

Let's let Mark answer that. One thing we've learned about Mark in studying this gospel—he was very intentional about how he arranged his material. A huge amount of Mark's message is found in how he presents things, the order in which he lays them out, the context, and the connections between events. So let's take a careful look at the surrounding context and the clues Mark gives us.

Context

The first clue is the one I mentioned at the beginning, when I told you it was ominous when Mark said Jesus sat and watched. The reason I said that was ominous is because of the last time Jesus did this. What happened the last time Jesus entered the Temple and observed—looked around at everything? Mark 11:11. It was when he first came to Jerusalem a few days before this. It says he looked around at everything, but it was too late to do what he wanted to do that day, so he came back the next morning, killed a tree on the way, then entered the Temple, overturned the tables and trashed everything.

“Why are you trashing the place, Jesus?”

“Because this place is supposed to be a house of prayer.”

¹ Some have suggested the widow likely had a daily income that would enable her to eat the next day—she was just making a one-time lavish gift that required her to go without eating just for one day. That seems to me a bit of a loose way to take the phrase “she gave everything, everything she had of earthly value.” And it doesn't solve the problem of the application being that we should be like the rich people (even if I give up eating for a day and donate the money I would have spent on food to the church, I'm still more like the rich people in the story than the widow). Nor does it solve the contextual problem.

But what was it instead? A den of robbers. And those tables he flipped over—what kind of tables were they? Money tables.

That action kicked off a war between Jesus and the Temple authorities that goes on for 2 chapters. Jesus tells a parable about how the owner of God's vineyard is going to come and slaughter the people in charge of the vineyard. The Temple authorities understand he was referring to them, so they go on the offensive. They try to discredit him, humiliate him, arrest him, kill him—they are his enemies. So Jesus quotes Psalm 110, which is all about how God will massacre the Messiah's enemies.

All that is what happened the last time Jesus entered the Temple and observed the financial transactions. Now he goes into the treasury area and observes again. So if you're tracking the context, this is ominous.

What happens this time? Immediately after Jesus says, "They will be punished most severely because they devour widows' households," lo and behold, 2 verses later, a widow shows up. That's not a coincidence—not the way Mark arranges material. Jesus says, "They will be severely punished for devouring widows' households," then, "Well, lookie there—a widow. Oh, and look—she has her entire net worth in her hands. Her entire household. I wonder where that's going to end up." Then CLANK, it disappears into the coffers of the den of robbers.

The Following Paragraph

How does Jesus feel about that? Last time when Jesus looked around at the financial transactions, in the next paragraph he was ransacking the Temple in anger. How about this time? We know Mark's pattern—he gives a little vignette, then the next paragraph shows us the right way to think about it. So what are the very next words we read after the widow story? (Remember, there were no chapter or verse divisions in the original—or even periods. So ignore the chapter division.) We have this incident with the widow without any comment as to whether it's good or bad. Then what? The Olivet Discourse? Not quite. The Olivet sermon doesn't actually begin until verse 5, in a new setting, different location, away from the Temple. But in the paragraph right after the widow story, Jesus is still there at the Temple. Here is Mark's explanatory words after the widow story:

Mark 13:1 As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

The temple was one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. It was a stunning feat of architecture and astonishing in beauty and splendor. This guy makes an upbeat comment about that, and look at Jesus' response.

Now remember, this is immediately after the account of the widow. Immediately after the account of the second woman Jesus was in a super good mood, right? "What she did was beautiful, she'll be remembered forever." How does Jesus' mood sound right after the widow gives her money?

13:2 "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

I don't want to use a term like "Debbie downer" or anything, but I have to say—it really doesn't sound to me like Jesus is in a very good mood at this point. This is more than just giving a matter-of-fact comment about how the building will one day come down. This sounds to me like emotional language. "Not one stone left ... every one ... *thrown down*" It sounds to me like he's about ready to tear it down himself.

Now, given everything we know about how Mark uses structure and context, could it be that Mark gives us this to help us understand how to think about the widow story? What if this passage isn't even designed to be a lesson on giving? What if (bear with me) what if the widow story is designed to address the same topic that filled the last two chapters that preceded it and the verses that follow it? I realize I'm way out on a limb here, but what if it actually fits the context? What if this isn't a heart-warming story of a poor widow giving her all, but rather it's a heart-breaking story of a how a poor, destitute widow was

duped into giving her last few dollars to support a corrupt den of robbers? And when Jesus said she gave more than all the others, the point wasn't about how generous she was, but about how corrupt the system was that made this poor widow come to believe that she had to put her last two dollars into the box. Jesus is pointing out, "This destitute widow has to shoulder a greater burden than all the rich people. What kind of system places a greater load on the poorest widow than on the richest among you?" And so this time, instead of just overturning tables, Jesus says, "This whole place is going to be crushed to powder."

God warned his people all through the OT what would happen if they took advantage of widows.

Exodus 22:22 Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.

Job 31:16 If I have ... let the eyes of the widow grow weary ... 22 then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint.

Malachi 3:5 So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against ... those who oppress the widows.

God warned them again and again. "Take advantage of widows and you'll have to answer to me." They didn't listen. They built a system that crushed widows, and so God says, "I'm going to crush you."

This passage is really just a replay of what happened in Isaiah 1, where God rejected the worship in the Temple because the people were doing things like oppressing widows.

Isaiah 1:11 "The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?" says the LORD. ... 13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. ... 17 learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

God was infuriated with the people in the Temple back then because of mistreatment of widows, and Jesus is just replaying that again in his day.

Modern Parallel

What happened that day in the Temple had been a problem since the days of Isaiah, and it's still a problem today. TV preachers who fly on private jets and buy \$10 million homes—where does all that money come from—what demographic? It's mostly elderly single women. Her husband dies, he's taken care of the finances for the last 50 years, now she's afraid and vulnerable and doesn't know what to do. A strong personality comes on the TV and convinces her that for God to take care of her she has to write a large check to the televangelist. Now he's buying a bigger jet while she can't pay her bills.

That's infuriating to us when we see it, and it was infuriating to Jesus in Mark 12. This isn't a heart-warming story about a widow who gave her all. It's an infuriating story of how a den of robbers devoured a widow's household.

And I'm not trying to disparage the widow. Maybe she had good motives and was just trying to honor God.² On the other hand, maybe she had bad motives. We just don't know, because Mark doesn't tell us, and he doesn't tell us because that's not the point.³

² An argument could be made that the widow should be seen as great in the kingdom simply because she is the least in the human scale of greatness. Jesus has been saying the last will be first and the least the greatest. And this story does seem to fit that great reversal theme when Jesus elevates her gift as being greater than the seemingly great gifts. And her gift did end up being the most famous donation ever made. That's remarkable when you consider the fact that the last thing this woman would have wanted was for anyone to even notice her. She was probably ashamed of the meager donation she was putting in the box. And rich people often publicize their gifts. Last year, Jeff Bezos made the largest single donation in the history of the world—\$10 billion to fight climate change. But how many people know about it? The widow gave 2 dollars, 2000 years ago. Bezos gave 10 billion just last year and he's one of the most famous men in the world. And yet far more people know about the widow's gift than Bezos' gift.

That said, I still don't think that's the point of the passage because, while those themes fit the larger context of Mark, the more immediate context strongly points to the interpretation I have argued for—that this is a tragic, maddening example of a corrupt system taking advantage of a poor widow and inviting God's wrath.

³ This is similar to the bookends around the spiritual insight section where Jesus heals a blind man for each bookend. The second

Sacrificial Giving

Now, does this mean we have to rethinking all our understanding about giving (give sacrificially, and it's the percentage that matters, not the amount, etc.)? No. Those doctrines are still intact. If we lose this passage as a giving passage, we don't lose any of those doctrines because those doctrines never really came out of this verse in the first place.

But they do come out of other passages. Sacrificial giving—is that biblical? Sure. In 2 Samuel 24 David said, "I will not sacrifice to the Lord that which cost me nothing." Paul praised the Macedonian churches for giving even in the midst of extreme hardship. Sacrificial giving is biblical for sure.

How about the idea that the percentage matters, not the amount? Again, that's a thoroughly biblical doctrine. That's what the tithe was all about. God required a percentage, not a set amount. Paul said to give in accordance with your income. A billionaire who gives 1% of his income is not a big giver (even though it's \$10 million). Someone who makes \$100 and gives \$20—that is a big giver.

Those doctrines are still intact. They just aren't the point of this passage. This passage is about why the Temple had to be destroyed. And I think there may also be some implications about what's going to replace the Temple—the new Temple (Jesus).

That also fits the flow of Mark. All through the book we've been getting hints about some major changes that are coming to God's vineyard—the people of God. All the way back in ch.2 Jesus said you can't put new wine in old wineskins. Jesus is going to usher in a time of new wine that can't be contained by the old systems. Then in ch.3 he appointed 12 Apostles, implying they will be the heads of a new 12 tribes of Israel. Later he talked about a new family structure that's coming, where people who do God's will are going to be more closely related to you than your blood relatives. Then in chapter 4 we get the parables about how the kingdom of God will start out really small and then grow to a huge, expansive reality. Then in ch.7 we find out in this new age, the whole kosher system will be cancelled—no more unclean foods. In Chapter 8 Jesus speaks of a time when the kingdom of God will come with power, illustrated by the Transfiguration. Most of the disciples will be dead before that happens, but Peter, James, and John got to see a foretaste of it on the mountain. And Jesus' shining glory up on the mountain calls to mind the presence of God on Mount Sinai, so the point is that Jesus will now be the locus of the presence of God. That's significant for us, because ever since Moses' time, the Temple has been where God's presence resided. So again, Jesus is the new Temple.

So I think what's going on here is Mark is contrasting the two bookends with these two women who give a gift. They are investing in different Temples. Another reason the widow story is so heartbreaking is what happens to her investment. She pours everything she owns into a building that's about to be razed to the ground. What a waste. Imagine investing every penny of your life savings into a building, and later that day you find out they are setting the dynamite because it's set to be demolished. And they blow it up. So much for your life savings.

But the second woman invests in Jesus. And she gets in on the ground floor of something really big—the kingdom that Jesus had been preaching about.

Widows and the New Temple

God took the vineyard away from those Temple authorities and gave it to someone else. He gave it to some people who would have the same heart toward helpless widows as Christ himself had. Who is that? Christ's body (the Church). That was God's plan—replace the den of robbers Temple that devoured widows' households with a new Temple that will have Christ's attitude toward widows. That's what God wanted—did it happen?

one (Bartimeus) is portrayed in a very favorable light as having tremendous spiritual insight. But we have no indication about the spiritual condition of the first one. We simply have the story of his two-stage healing without any commentary about the man himself. These two women are the same way. The second one is held up as exemplary, but no information about the first one.

When you get to the book of Acts, which is the story of the new Israel and the new Temple of God, as the church begins to organize itself, what is the very first ministry they create? A ministry for the care of widows (Acts 6). In the pastoral epistles, which teach us how to run a church, there's not a chapter on worship, there's not a chapter on prayer ministry, there's not a chapter on evangelism or youth ministry or children's ministry. But there's a whole chapter on caring for widows.

1 Timothy 5:3 Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.

There are two offices in church leadership—elder and deacon. Elders lead the church and do the teaching and preaching. Deacons were created initially to serve widows.

Widows were taken advantage of in the old system; in the new Israel, you get the sense they are almost obsessed with caring for widows. And not only did they care for widows, they honored widows. There are three offices in the early church where we find a list of qualifications.

- 1) Elders.
- 2) Deacons
- 3) Widow's list.

Evidently, there was some kind of list of widows that was a leadership position in the church, and a widow had to be highly qualified to get on that list. Who are the leaders among the new people of God? Pastors, widows, and people who serve widows.

So yes, God got what he wanted—a new Israel that feels the same way he does about orphans and widows. Orphanages, women's shelters, crisis pregnancy centers, hospitals—they're almost all founded by Christians. There are no atheist orphanages.

Caring for the helpless is so close to the heart of God that it's a fundamental part of knowing God.

James 1:27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Application

So what does all this mean for you? The obvious application is we need to have a heart for the helpless. When you see orphans and widows in the Bible, that's shorthand for anyone in a helpless situation. If I'm trying to decide which missionary to support, all other factors equal, I'll support the one that has a ministry to orphans and widows. We teach our children to stick up for kids at school that are bullied. In every aspect of life we have a heart for the helpless. If someone is being gossiped about—they're helpless because they aren't there to defend themselves—you stand up for them in that moment.

And one other point of application: how about when you're helpless? When someone gossips about you. When you get blamed for something that isn't your fault. When your spouse pulls some kind of power play. When government officials make stupid policies that destroy your retirement nest egg. God puts stories like this in the Bible because he wants you to understand what happens to his emotions when things like that happen to you.

Whenever you find yourself in orphan/widow status—helpless, oppressed, mistreated—that is a trumpet blast that summons God to your side, and when he comes, he is furious with the person who is taking advantage of your helpless state. That's a great comfort for us when we're mistreated. If you think no one sees when you're being treated unjustly, think again. Psalm 18 paints the picture of what happens in God's emotions when you're mistreated.

Psalm 18:6 In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. 7 The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook; they trembled because he was angry. 8 Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it. 9 He parted the heavens and came down ... 13 The LORD thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded. 14 He shot his arrows and scattered the enemies, great bolts of lightning and routed them.

That's how much God loves you.

Summary

The traditional interpretation of this passage is that it is a lesson on sacrificial giving. But that ignores the context, and the application makes no sense (the widow is an example for us because, unlike those who gave large gifts, she gave everything, therefore we should give large gifts but not necessarily everything). The meaning in context is to give an illustration of the Temple authorities devouring a widow's household, infuriating Jesus, which is why in the next paragraph he talks about the demolition of the Temple. The new Temple (the Church) honors widows.