

# Giving, Taking and Religious Scandal

*A sermon on Mark 12:38-44 by Nathan Nettleton, 10 November 2024*

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## Message

Jesus affirms generous giving, but he also condemns the religious exploitation of generous givers.

## Sermon

There is a really obvious temptation for me as I come to speak on tonight's gospel reading. The Baptist Union have decided to relieve us of ownership of our church property, and that is going to leave a 44 thousand dollar a year hole in our church budget. While they have indicated a willingness to offer us some compensation for that, it would be phased out over three or four years, and we would be expected to fill the hole by increasing our offerings.

So right at a time when we are needing to think seriously about how we each give in support of this church, here we have the story usually titled "The Widow's Mite" in which Jesus points out a poor widow who puts everything she's got into the temple offering box and contrasts her with other much wealthier people who give only a little of their surplus.

How easy it would be to grab the opportunity for a stewardship sermon and exhort everyone to give sacrificially and boost their offerings to fill our financial black hole. No doubt in many many churches around the world today, that is pretty much exactly what will be preached. Some will probably designate this as Stewardship Sunday and kick off a big push to boost the offerings, clear debts and start new building funds.

If you'd been in the USA for the last year, you'd have found that the political candidates were behaving just like the tele-evangelist preachers, constantly asking people to send in their donations. Most of those tele-evangelist preachers do not follow the same cycle of Bible readings as us, but you can be sure that this story comes up quite often in their impassioned appeals for more money.

But there is a nasty trap here for us preachers who might fall for this obvious temptation. We may be completely missing the point of the story and veering dangerously towards exactly the sort of behaviour that Jesus was condemning when he told this story.

In a few of my recent sermons I've been pointing out the way different stories in Mark's gospel make reference to each other and so are better understood in relation to one another instead of in isolation. And indeed, this is another one of those stories of which it is easy to miss the point if we lift it out of its context and look at it on its own. With this one, we don't even have to turn the pages back. It is just the immediate context that matters.

When we see it, suddenly it appears that maybe Jesus wasn't celebrating the widow's generosity at all. He's not criticising her either, but maybe he was lamenting an awful injustice that she had fallen victim to and exposing the perpetrators.

What was Jesus talking about in the lines immediately before the description of the widow and her offering?

*As he taught, Jesus said, "Beware of the religious experts, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! **They devour widows' houses** and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." And then he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury and said, "This poor widow, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."*

These religious hot-shots, they devour widows' houses. See, this impoverished widow has just given them everything she had to live on.

Suddenly I'm losing my taste for a stewardship sermon. Because suddenly it seems that what Jesus is doing is lamenting the plight of the impoverished victim of one too many stewardship sermons that manipulate vulnerable people into giving above and beyond what they can afford to give with the promise that so doing will not only please God but will result in God pouring out rich blessings and rewarding them tenfold and a hundredfold.

I've heard a fair few of those stewardship sermons and tithing appeals, and some of them begin to sound suspiciously like the same advertising pitch that the gambling industry makes. You've got to be in it to win it. The more you put in, the greater your odds of reaping rich winnings. Just add a few God words and you've got "The more money you put in here, the more richly God will prosper you and reward you and bless you. Double your pledge, and God will quadruple your blessing."

And if we go back a bit in church history, it sounds suspiciously like some other sins we've had to repent of. We built Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome with the proceeds of the sale of indulgences which callously exploited people's concern over the fate of their loved ones by promising that their donations to the building fund could secure the release their loved one's souls from purgatory. It may not have been the worst sin ever committed by the church and its clergy, but it was one that led directly to the fracturing of the unity of the western church, a fracturing from which we have never recovered. And maybe it is not too far fetched to imagine a slippery slope that runs from the financial exploitation of vulnerable people under our pastoral care all the way to the sort of sexual exploitation for which so many of my fellow pastors and priests are now being exposed and justly condemned.

You see, that's where the thrust of this passage goes. It is about the exposure of abusive and exploitative behaviours by religious people, and especially by religious leaders. It is not necessarily illegitimate to suggest that Jesus is commending the faith shown by the impoverished widow. He does imply that her faith and open-handedness are worth more than the lucrative sponsorship deals and well publicised philanthropic donations of those who have more than enough left to live on very comfortably, thank you very much.

But that doesn't seem to be the real focus. Even when he speaks of her faith and generosity, Jesus seems to be pointing her out as evidence of his charges against the religious leaders. Beware of religious leaders who like to display their religiosity and stand out from the crowd, to be treated with great reverence and deference in public, and to have the seats of honour at public occasions. They love to be invited to give impressive prayers at important events, and to get their own slots on television so they can build their profile and appeal for funds from a wider pool of donors. But behind the facade, they are feathering their nests by exploiting the gullibility of people who have been told that God is a celestial poker machine, and they are

sexually exploiting children and vulnerable adults who have trustingly looked to them for pastoral care and leadership.

And then Jesus says a very interesting and confronting thing. He says, “They will receive the greater condemnation.” They will receive the greater condemnation. What is really interesting about this is that if you sit down some time with the gospels and try to find all the places where Jesus directs words or threats of condemnation against the conventional catalogue of “sinners” outside the community of the religious, you will come up almost empty handed. You can search in vain for examples of Jesus waving a Bible and screaming condemnations at gay people, or remarried divorcees, or abortionists, or drug abusers, or any of the other targets on the hit list of contemporary Christian hatred and fury.

And here we have some evidence that this is not just an accidental omission on the part of his gospel writers. Jesus is quite clear. It is the religious people who trumpet their religiousness but cynically distort it into a means of furthering their own selfish or even corrupt interests who will receive the greater condemnation. Jesus shows very little interest in condemning the conventional garden-variety “sinners”.

The morality zealots are always very fond of the verse where Jesus tells the adulterous woman to “go and sin no more”, but the reason they are so fond of it is that it is about as close as you can get to finding Jesus speaking against someone for one of their pet sins. It hardly sounds like condemnation, but it is about the closest they can find. Mostly Jesus seems to have only words of welcome and acceptance and forgiveness and reconciliation for such people. It is for us religious people when we fail to follow his lead on such things that he says, “They will receive the greater condemnation.”

So what are we to say about the widow herself, and her contribution to the offering box? While there is no doubt that Jesus is lamenting the abusive system that left her feeling that she should put her essential housekeeping money into the temple treasury, he does seem to be impressed with her faith and commitment and he does contrast her favourably with those who contributed more in dollar terms but far less as a percentage of their income.

I think this suggests that when we do start thinking about stewardship and tithing and church finances, we need to make sure we think communally and not just individually. We need to be aware that the financial decisions we make impact on one another, and we need to watch that we are not putting undue pressure on those least resourced to deal with it.

As a Baptist congregation, we are financially autonomous. Our bills are not covered by a head office somewhere. When we decide to employ a pastor or buy some new computer resources or pay our insurance, it is up to us here to cover the costs of those things out of our own pockets. But our own pockets are not all equally deep, and so when we are planning what we will spend, we need to ensure that we are not increasing the costs and then putting pressure on members who have little to spare to increase their offerings. And on the other side, those of us who are more financially comfortable need to be aware that if we do not pull our weight, and our weight may be much greater than others’, then we are thereby increasing the pressure on others.

When we meet tomorrow night to decide about releasing the church property and whether to sell the manse, the different options have financial implications. Some of them would require

us to raise significantly more in offerings, and you don't vote in favour of one of those options unless you are personally willing to increase your own giving by that sort of percentage. It is not fair to vote for it and expect the increased cost to be borne by others but not you.

And since I am starting to veer towards a stewardship sermon here, let me assure you that I do not stand to gain personally from any increase in the offerings. I am paid at a set rate, proposed by the Baptist Union and ratified by you, and while your offerings contribute to that, my pay does not rise or fall with them. So your offerings are not about you supporting my ministry in the way it is with many of those tele-evangelist ministries.

What our offerings are about is all of us together taking responsibility for the financial obligations we have taken on together. Though we don't usually make a big deal about it, we have a calculator in the members section of our church website which you can use for guidance on a reasonable offering level, and it is designed to first ensure that people who have little to live on are not expected to pull above their weight in the church finances. The widow with her mite was pulling way above her weight in the temple finances, and Jesus was scathing in his condemnation of a system and its organisers that would make her feel that sacrificing her needs, not her wants but her basic needs, was what God required of her.

Well, if this was an opportunity for a stewardship sermon, I'm sure it has been a squandered opportunity, because my observations have probably been more likely to make some people feel less burdened to give than others more so, and quite possibly some should be feeling more pressure. I wouldn't know. I have no idea what most of you give, and I don't wish to.

What I do hope you have taken from this gospel story is that integrity really matters, especially among church leaders. At a time when scandalous abuse by pastors and priests is constantly re-appearing in the newspapers, we need to be vigilant in ensuring that we do not create and perpetuate cultures that put some people above question and above the law and so foster a climate that is conducive to abuse.

We've had our scandals here before, and we need to take it seriously even at our little local level. If you have concerns about me or others in leadership here, don't be afraid to raise them. Before long, the Host Group will probably organise another pastoral review. It will provide an additional opportunity for you to provide feedback or raise concerns. Pastoral ministry comes with some unique temptations and vulnerabilities, and as committed to transparency as I am, I am not without my blind spots.

Your feedback may even help to identify a worrying emerging pattern in the way I operate that I haven't become aware of myself yet. It is part of my job to ask such questions of you, but ideally it is part of your job to ask them of me when I need them too. As followers of Jesus, we can all be calling each other to more fully live up to our calling. You might not have more than a mite to put in the offering plate, but we can all play our part in urging one another on to be the kind of community that will not be the ones to receive Jesus's greater condemnation.