

# Religious Exploitation

## Stewardship Emphasis Sunday

Mark 12:38-44  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Each fall when the temperature starts to drop, and the leaves begin to change color and fall from the trees, you can be sure of one thing: a Presbyterian church near you is in the midst of their annual Stewardship Campaign. It's the annual rite of passage before the season of Advent, and before finalizing a budget for the coming year.

It's very important to remember, however, that **biblical stewardship is not about fundraising, but rather a spiritual discipline that becomes a way of life. In fact, good stewardship is more about our need to give and contribute – in response to God's goodness and grace – than it is about the church's need to receive.**

One of the scripture passages that comes up every three years on the lectionary church calendar during stewardship season is today's Gospel lesson from Mark 12. You are probably familiar with this biblical story that is often called "The Widow's Mite." That's m-i-t-e, which is an old term for coin. I grew up thinking it was m-i-g-h-t, and never could understand why the widow was considered so strong.

Traditionally (and I emphasize 'traditionally'), the church has used this story of the destitute widow as the ideal symbol for Christian generosity, wholehearted discipleship, good stewardship and total commitment. Traditional sermons on this text often tend to overlook the wealthy people mentioned in the story who gave only out of their excess, as well as to downplay the behavior of the scribes. Why? Because stewardship season is not a good time to offend church members, especially the wealthier ones whose quantitatively larger financial gifts are needed to raise the funds to support the church budget. (Upon reflection, there's probably wisdom to that approach...)

This story, therefore, is most often interpreted as a sentimental tale of sacrificial giving, giving your all to God. If the overall message is that **there is nothing in our lives or in our being that should be held back from God**, that's fine. I agree with that. But that's not what usually happens. Case in point, one biblical commentary I looked at this week interpreted the story in a typically traditional way: "What makes the widow's gift valuable and important is not its size but the heart and the sacrifice behind it. In the eyes of the passers-by, the widow's offering is virtually worthless but in the sight of God it is most precious. [I tend to be wary of any commentator who used the word 'precious.'] After throwing her last two coins in the box, she is able to say, 'This is the best I can do for it's all that I have got.' What wins her the Lord's favor and earns his commendation, is the fact that she kept nothing back for herself. Her small gift is her all. In a way she is making an offering of her total life to God. This gospel story invites us to live in a way that hurts and does not count the cost, for it is in giving that we receive."

[Knowles, Desmond, *Voicing a Thought on Sunday: Homilies and Prayers for the Faithful for the Three-Year Cycle*, The Columbia Press/Twenty-Third Publications, 1991, p.248]

Well, I'm glad that College Hill is *not* a traditional congregation and that I have become a fairly non-traditional preacher. Because when I now hear this story

interpreted in this way it makes me cringe. I even find it theologically and socially offensive. Why? Because the only way to interpret this story in such a manner is through a complete disregard for its historical context. One would have to ignore the social, political, and religious dimensions of the text, as well as its place in the gospel of Mark, to turn it into a sentimental tale of good stewardship. So let's look at its context.

According to Mark, watching the destitute widow throw in her *last* two coins into the Temple treasury comes at the very end of Jesus' public ministry during the last week of his life. Jesus had just overturned the tables of the money-changers in the Temple courtyard a few days earlier. The gospel writer has already made it clear that **Jesus thought part of the institutionalized religious Temple system had become corrupt and abusive**. Added to that, the most important element needed to help interpret the story of the widow is what immediately precedes it. That is why it was included in today's reading. Jesus says, "Beware of the scribes, 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 honor at banquets! **They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.** They will receive the greater condemnation" (vs. 38-40).

**Who were the scribes?** Scribes were scholars, lawyers, and interpreters of the Hebrew law – the Torah, found in the first five books of what we call the Old Testament. Jesus doesn't criticize all scribes, just the ones who were putting themselves on public display; the ones who were pretentious, arrogant and demanded places of honor and prestige; the ones who put up a pretense of piety, all the while draining the resources of widows, who were already near the bottom rung of the social ladder. **Jesus particularly condemns the hypocrisy of their long prayers that were used to mask their greed; their religious practices used as a pretext for injustice; using religion for personal gain.**

**How does any of this relate to us today?** It immediately reminded me of certain TV evangelists, faith healers, and even some who preach a prosperity gospel. That includes anyone who takes advantage of and preys on the poor, elderly, sick and desperate, and yes, even the superstitious, by asking them to send in their money in return for God's blessing and answers to their prayers. In my opinion, this is among the worst forms of religious exploitation and spiritual abuse.

It is with all this in mind that Mark next tells the story of the widow's offering, therefore continuing the theme of the exploitation of widowed women. Yet unlike traditional interpretations, modern progressive biblical scholars are asking new and different questions of this biblical passage. For instance, the text does not explicitly praise the widow's actions, but merely comments on the size of her offering and sacrifice. Rather, she serves as a concrete example of how innocent people could be victimized by the Temple authorities.

How? Many believe today that Jesus' comments about the widow are really meant to be a sad lament about her predicament, continuing the denunciation of the scribes, who instead of caring for this woman as the law directed them to do, are part of an institutional system that is robbing her of her last pennies. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that **Jesus wasn't teaching about 'giving until it hurts' at all, but is rather attacking both the scribes and those elements in the religious Temple system that compelled this woman to offer her last tiny coins, as though God would demand such total financial sacrifices of the poor of the world.**

Let me reiterate this last point. Do you believe in a God that would require you to give to the church all that you own, and all that you have to live on? I don't. That's some kind of greedy legalistic god, not the God of grace and compassion that we profess.

So perhaps this story, in its context, asks us to see these scribes not just as bad examples, but also as part of a corrupted system - a religious system, no less, that abuses and exploits the poor for its own gain. **A religious system that's more concerned with its own institutional maintenance than it is on ministering to those in need.**

**The poor widowed woman who Jesus observes, far from being a sentimental example of faithful stewardship, is an unwitting pawn of an abusive institutional system demanding her obedience.**

So, it is in this context this morning that I remind you that today is Stewardship Sunday, the day the church asks you to give of your time, talents and finances to *this* religious system. Perhaps today's gospel lesson, then, should be seen as a warning to churches, including our own, to see if our religious systems have been infiltrated by any injustice and exploitation of others. **We are asked to evaluate whether our piety – our spirituality – is genuine, or just a big show of hypocritical appearances.**

I wonder what Jesus would have to say about the institutionalized Christian religious systems of today. For when Christianity is in any way guilty of injustice, oppression, or exploitation (which I personally think it sometimes is), then perhaps Jesus' condemnation of the scribes applies to us as well.

I'm here this morning, therefore, not to tell you to give until it hurts, but rather to thank you for the contributions of your time, abilities and yes your financial resources that are used (hopefully in a faithful and responsible manner with integrity) to help support the work and ministry of this congregation and beyond, and buildup the kingdom of God in our midst.

Together let's evaluate with a discerning eye what we do and say as a congregation, so that we might make right any abuse, injustice or exploitation we discover in our religious system. And perhaps most importantly, **understand your stewardship as a spiritual discipline and as a way of life.**

Amen.