

## Giving your All

Mark 12:38- 48

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I've got to tell you that after a first read of this text this week, which was Sunday evening while sitting on my living room couch, I squirmed some, adjusted the pillows some, and then finally put my Bible down on the coffee table, got up and walked away for awhile; An hour or so later, I sat down, picked up the Bible again, read the passage through again; and adjusted the pillows again. I did all of that before I finally mustered enough nerve to face this thing head on. This text has put me very much on the defensive, as I think it probably should put all pastors on the defensive. As you heard, Jesus condemns the scribes for wearing long robes and having the best seats in the house. And here I stand, I can do no other! (to quote a famous theologian). Before we even begin to look at the scripture in depth, I feel I need to address Jesus' accusations. I could tell you that I wear a robe because it is tradition. I could also tell you that I wear a robe because a robe is less distracting for you, my listeners, than street clothes. When I wear a robe, you can't spend sermon time fixating on the spot on my blouse. But hey, I'm not stupid. The other reason for the robe, probably the primary reason for the robe, is that it gives me and the pastoral role I play here in this place, an aura of authority. As if I really DO know what I am talking about. I imagine that is one of the primary reasons that those scribes wore robes, too. So, on this count, like the scribes, I am guilty.

The part in our scripture passage about scribes having the best seats in the house, also applies to pastors, including your pastor. It is one of the primary perks of this job. You know when I really covet this seat? On Christmas Eve, when we do our candlelight service and we are singing silent night. You have your individual candles lit as at my previous church those congregation members had their individual candles lit. From this place, at the front of the church, I get to see all of your faces lit up; Your faces are not unlike Jack- o- lanterns since there is definitely a light shining from within each of you on that special night; but also the candle light makes you look like floating heads hovering between floor and vaulted ceiling—every year I am reminded of angels because your faces look like what I imagine angels' faces must look like when angels fly about- - if there is such a thing as angels and therefore angel faces; and if angels really do fly.

I could tell you that I sit in that seat because it's a shorter distance from there to here, than from the first pew to here, but it is really again,

not the whole truth. I sit here, in this best seat of the house because it lends an aura of authority to me and also to the entire service. In this, once more I, and other pastors, have much in common with those dastardly scribes. So, I am guilty on this count, too.

In the next phrase in our scripture passage, Jesus continues his harangue against scribes. He says that they devour widows' houses. Now this part especially bothered me as I sat on my couch last Sunday. That is the reason I put such energy into repositioning my pillows. I was trying to wiggle out of this particular accusation—surely I am not a threat to widows! I found out this week that actually what Jesus is talking about is the way that the legal system favored scribes to the detriment of widows. Remember, in Jewish society at that time, women had no voice in the legal system. A man must represent a widow before any court of law. When a widow needed to sell her house, then, if she had no male relations, she was often assigned a scribe to act for her interests. I mean, who better, right? Scribes were thought to be close to God and therefore above reproach. Hah! A scribe could be as unscrupulous as anybody else, and many of them were. So it sometimes came to pass that a widow lost the proceeds of her house, because she was duped by a presumably God fearing scribe. In effect, her house had been devoured.

We have no comparable system today so that lets us pastor types off the hook—except- -except that my salary is dependent on what is dropped in the offering plate; If you are a widow and you sell your house, and then you give the church your entire proceeds, it stands to reason that I am a direct beneficiary, as other pastors are also direct beneficiaries of what is dropped in the offering plates at their churches. Once again, then, I plead guilty.

There is one more accusation leveled by Jesus—not just at the scribes this time, but by the members of the temple in general. And here you can squirm a little, too, because by analogy, you and I both are the members of the temple. You and I both are the ones putting money into the church treasury. Jesus says that everyone contributing to the treasury contributes out of their abundance except the one widow who gives out of her poverty. On this final point, I am not absolutely guilty, since I do give to the church a set portion of my income. That is, I do not give from my expendable resources—I'll let you speak for yourselves on this one—however, I am definitely not as generous and probably you are not as generous as the widow who gives all that she has. So, on this, we can all plead guilty.

I would like to take the rest of our time here today unpacking what Jesus has to say on this last point since it touches on all of us, and not just

clergy. Maybe we can make this text more palatable for us all and also get at the heart of what Jesus is saying.

First we need to clarify, I think, “How are clergy and wealthy temple members different from the widow?” Jesus has already told us it is because temple members put in a great deal of money while the widow puts in very little; and also because the money they put into the treasury comes from their abundance, while she puts money in out of her poverty. They give what’s left over after food, clothes, mortgage, rent, and vacation. She puts in all that she has so that she may not have money enough even for her next meal. But that does not get at the real heart of the matter, does it? We want to know—how are their MOTIVES different?

A colleague tells me that the money box that constituted the temple treasury was a big metal affair and that when you put your coins in they rolled, clang, clang, clang down a chute. In other words, if you put in a lot of coins, you made a big racket. The more money, the more clanging. Making a racket at the treasury was a way of telling the world, “See, I am successful and I am a good, noble person.” That certainly explains some peoples’ motive for putting money in the temple treasury and probably why some people contribute to church budgets as well.

In contrast, we have the widow. Her money does not make any noise at all as it slides down the chute. What could possibly be HER reason for putting money in? One thought is that she put in money because she has been misled by those aforementioned dastardly scribes. She was persuaded that even though she might live in squalor now, her contribution would give her choice seating in heaven. That is a disturbing thought, isn’t it? If that were the case, though, then surely, surely, Jesus, who as we all know was a quick read of peoples’ hearts, would have taken her aside and said, “Woman, keep your money. You already have a reserved seat at that great banquet table in the sky.” Since Jesus doesn’t say that, we can deduce that she put her money in for some other, and very sound reasons. Perhaps she wanted to give back to God because she had had a long, fulfilling life. That is a good reason to give. Gratitude. Perhaps she put in her last penny because before she died, she wanted to make sure that her life had made a positive difference in the world— Hope in the future. That too is a good reason to give, don’t you think?

Gratitude, Hope. There is yet another motive for giving but I don’t have a word that actually describes what that is. Maybe the word I am searching for is generosity, or altruism. My consultation with the thesaurus yielded nothing. It is probably best to explain what I am talking about in story form and let you come up with your own word. I’m in luck, because I just happen to have one- a story that is, told to me by a pastor friend. It’s about an old gentleman who was a member of a

church in Texas. It's a true story, although my friend couldn't remember the gentleman's name. Let's call him Harry. According to my friend, Harry lived during the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and he had made a fortune in oil. Rather than hold on to his fortune, though, Harry gave large sums to Baylor University. It was used to construct buildings on Baylor's campus and to educate young Christians. He also gave a great deal of money to his church and even sent his pastor to Europe to preach to soldiers during the First World War. Then, in the stock market crash of 1929, this generous man lost what little money he had kept for himself.

One day, a friend who was struck by how humbly this man was now living – asked Harry "When you think about all the money you gave away, do you ever wish you had it back?" Harry didn't hesitate. "Friend," he said. "The only thing I have left is what I gave away."

My thinking is, that would have been the same response made by the widow who dropped her last penny in the treasury, were we to ask her why she gave away even that. "The only thing I have left is what I gave away." What do you call that kind of motive? Maybe it's gratitude, hope, generosity and altruism all rolled up into one. Or maybe it's not a word I'm looking for at all—it's a phrase, call it Christ-centered living.

Those two stories make all of us squirm in our seats, I should think. Let us strive to learn and live the lessons they impart. For you as for me. Amen