

Faith Is the Amount that Counts!

Mark 12:38-44

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St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

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. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.

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. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on." (Mark 12:38-44, NIV84)

Dear followers of Jesus Christ, our Savior:

The first-grade teacher was teaching her class about coins. "Which coin is worth more: A penny or a nickel?" "The nickel!" they answered. And they got the other answers right, too: A dime is worth more than a nickel, and a quarter is worth more than the dime.

It seems that Jesus would have flunked 1st grade math in today's gospel reading. Noticing people putting their offerings into the temple treasury in the courtyard, Jesus saw how many of them were plunking in large amounts of gold, silver and copper coins. And then came a poor widow who put in two very small copper coins, "worth only a fraction of a penny." Jesus remarked, "This poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others." Of course, Jesus knew the value of the coins. But what he was teaching his disciples—and us—is this: **Faith Is the Amount that Counts!**

This took place on Tuesday of Holy Week, just a couple of days before Jesus' enemies would capture him through Judas' betrayal, and then have him crucified on Good Friday. That Tuesday in the temple courtyards, the Jewish council including teachers of the law kept trying to trip Jesus into saying something wrong or foolish, but they kept failing. Then Jesus turned the tables on the so-called law-experts. He pointed out their hypocrisy. They did everything for show: Their fancy, flowing robes; sitting in the honorable places in the synagogues and at banquets; even their public prayers were meant "for a show," but not spoken sincerely. Outwardly they looked so pious, but inwardly they didn't have faith in God.

Jesus pointed out a particular sin the teachers of the law did: "They devour widows' houses." With their knowledge of the Jewish law codes, they likely manipulated the system and loopholes in the law so that they were able to skim profits off widows and dependents' property—people they were supposed to protect—and then claim deductions on their taxes when they gave large amounts to the temple. Probably that poor widow was a victim of the law-teachers' greed. But the law-teachers were acting, "Look at how much we're giving to the temple, how good we are" when their profits were made to impoverish the widows.

Jesus warned, "Such men will be punished most severely." There are degrees of hell, and Jesus warned that these law experts who should have known better would be punished more severely than others. They were condemned because their hypocrisy added up to zero faith.

“Watch out!” Jesus tells us. Watch out, not only for the teachers of the law and hypocrites out there, but for hypocrisy in here—in our hearts. The hypocrite in us wants others to think how good we are: Showing off how much we do at church (we’re better than those “slackers”), or even how much we give in the offering basket. Many years ago, some churches had what was nicknamed “the scandal sheet”—a list of all members and the amount of the offerings each one gave to church that year. That was a horrible practice. Those who gave little, because they were poor, would feel ashamed, while those who gave much could get filled with pride. Thankfully, I don’t know of any church that has the scandal sheet any more. But watch out! We can still fool ourselves into thinking that the amount of our actions, our good works, our offerings are what counts toward our salvation. No, **faith is the amount that counts!** All good deeds and no faith add up to zero salvation, and to death and hell.

But now let’s look at the widow and her offering, just those two tiny coins that didn’t even add up to the value of a penny. How was it that Jesus could say that she “put more into the treasury than all the others”? Jesus said, “They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.” This poor widow had very little, yet she gave all she had. That took a large amount of faith, trust in the Lord!

We need to be clear about the lesson of this story. The lesson is not, “Just put in two small coins in the offering basket and God will be happy.” Nor is it, “Put in all your income into the offering basket.” The Bible, after all, tells us, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). And, “Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue” (Romans 13:7). Good stewardship of our money includes providing for family, paying taxes, giving to the poor, as well as our offerings to the Lord at church.

Here’s the key. As you give, trust in the Lord. The widow put all her trust in the Lord to provide. Like the widow in the Old Testament reading, who gave all her food to Elijah, the Lord didn’t let her family shrivel up and die, but provided for them. So as we give our offerings, we do so trusting that the Lord will provide for us as well.

You see, our trust is all in the Lord. And that trust will not disappoint us. For we know what our Lord has already done for us. We read in today’s epistle reading (2 Cor. 8:9): “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Jesus gave the greatest amount of all: He impoverished himself, left behind his glory and majesty in heaven to humble himself, suffer and die to take our sins away. Through him we have become rich in the ways that count: Rich in God’s grace, rich in his forgiveness, rich in God’s providence and care.

Faith in Christ is what counts. Faith leads us to trust in the Lord when we have little, and to be generous toward the Lord and toward others when we have much. The believers of the early church were a great example. Many of them sold their belongings and property and collectively shared them with one another, so that no one had too much and no one had too little. I think that’s also what the psalmist meant when he wrote, “I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread” (Ps. 37:25). It doesn’t mean that as Christians we’ll never see poverty. But it does mean we can trust in the Lord to provide. Yes, **Faith Alone Is the Amount that Counts!** Amen.