

A Widow's Example

November 11, 2018
Wittenberg Lutheran Center

Well, this is our last service before you all return home for Thanksgiving break... Giving thanks is already coming into focus for us here today. For many people, today is Armistice Day – a big one this year, because it marks the 100th anniversary of the last shots fired during World War I. Hardly anybody is alive today who remembers WWI firsthand. We don't even call it Armistice Day or Truce day anymore. But imagine thankfully celebrating PEACE... the end of a conflict that had lasted four years and enlisted nearly five million Americans. Over a hundred-thousand US servicemen died, and twice that number were wounded; and our involvement was only for about a year-and-a-half. Many of these young men were married, and they left behind as many widows. The total number of women worldwide who were widowed from this war was between three and four million, most of them European. This had a significant demographic effect on Europe lasting two or three generations. This surplus of older, un-married women and the scarcity of surviving younger men resulted in a gender imbalance that didn't even itself out over there before another global war occurred in the European theatre.

Widows are a thing to consider today, because throughout the Bible, the subject of widows keeps coming up. There are about eighty direct references to widows in the Scriptures. In Jesus' time, widows relied on either the generosity of their family or the charity of their neighbors. If a woman's husband had been wealthy, she had provisions for her care. But these women were in danger of losing everything if they were unprotected. God keeps a careful eye on the widow. He's deeply concerned for her, together with the stranger and the fatherless. God commanded that the nation of Israel care for widows, too, being diligent to not isolate them or take advantage of their vulnerability.

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However, as the nation of Israel turned away from serving God, they also turned away from His commandments. Who do you suppose suffered when that happened? Widows were among the first casualties. The Old Testament prophets repeatedly scolded anybody who treated widows poorly. They commended those who gave them aid, like the widow of Zarephath [1 Kings 17:8-16]. Prophets like Elijah and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Malachi and the Psalmists, were all calling the nation back to its God-given duty and responsibility. But by the time Jesus came, things had not improved much. Our Gospel message today [Mark 12:38-44] tells of our loving Savior, Who had Himself just denounced the scribes for '*devouring widows' houses*'. He then showed, by His own example, how widows really should be treated. We should acknowledge their plight, help them, and, as here, praise them whenever such praise is in order. So why did Jesus give this woman so much credit?

What the widow gave amounted to practically nothing on the market. But Jesus notes that it's not the quantity; it's the quality of her gift that matters, and He's touched by it. These were Jesus' last moments in the temple before His passion. In our Lord's last days of public teaching in the temple, there was much that He witnessed that offended Him, causing Him to rebuke the people and their leaders. But He also observed things that were good, even though they seemed rather insignificant. Week after week the wealthy threw in much. There's nothing wrong with that. The widow threw in two coins. There's nothing meritorious really about that. Jesus' explanation follows in the last verse. A Bible-reading tip for you, offered here free-of charge, is when you hear Jesus say, "*I tell you the truth*", it's a signal that things aren't necessarily what they seem until Jesus gives us His two-cents worth. The point here is that in her heart she was completely selfless.

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Jesus knew that she was poor, anybody could see that by the way she was dressed. Jesus knew that she was a widow because, well, He's Jesus – He's omniscient. That's also how He knew that her offering was all she had. God sees what man overlooks. Those big gifts in the temple, the ones that made a lot of noise when they rattled down the receptacle in the courtyard, were surely noticed by everybody. But Jesus saw what no one else did. God's perception is better and His evaluation is different from man's. The widow's two mites added up to less than a penny, but hers was BIGGER... a true sacrifice. The rich in the temple that day had not begun to give to the level of her sacrifice. Here was a woman in need of receiving charity, yet she had a heart to give. God always blesses giving that comes from faith. She didn't have enough to live on as it was, but what she had she gave to the Lord. That's what I call an investment! She was completely invested in her God. This is what absolute dependence on God looks like.

To give her last cent as she did meant that she placed herself entirely into the keeping of God. She knew her God could and would provide for her far better and more surely than any two coins, or even a million times any number of coins. That's why Jesus was so pleased with this sacrifice, because it showed that it was given out of the right motive, in deep love and trust to God. Such willing and cheerful givers reflect the love of God. She gave by faith. But the rich in this case had given from a lack of faith. They gave "*out of their wealth*", meaning out of their surplus, out of that which they didn't really need anyway. The woman gave "*out of her poverty*", meaning out of her shortage, her need, her desperation. The poor widow demonstrated to the Lord that she had not been led astray by the corrupt leaders who devoured the houses of widows like her; not all of them had been devastated by that kind of same carnal mind – there was yet a remnant who was willing to sacrifice it all, demonstrating their devotion.

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You might wonder, what did she eat that evening? I'm sure the Lord took care of that. I wouldn't be surprised if it was one of Jesus' disciples who was moved to help her out. We know that the early church took care of widows like her [Acts 6]. In fact, the task was so important in Jerusalem that seven deacons were selected, men of good reputation, full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, to be responsible for ministering to the widows' needs. And a little later, St. Paul laid out clear instructions [1 Timothy 5] about how widows were to be regarded and treated. St. James didn't mince any words either [James 1:27] when he said, in effect, "Let's be clear about the nature of real religion. It must be visible and practical. It visits widows and orphans in their trouble, as it maintains moral purity in an evil world." Our world is an evil minefield of traps put there by the devil. But our God has promised to be with us to the end. He fulfills His promise and continues to be present with us in His Word and His sacraments.

All today who strive to love God with all their heart, mind, and strength, He examines to determine what their hearts are filled with. Poverty can be either a curse or a blessing. It becomes a curse when it fills our heart with anxious care and worry, with murmuring and complaining, especially if it leads to unbelief and dishonesty. But being poor becomes a blessing when it leads the impoverished to trust himself to God Who has promised to care for His children. By the same thinking we can also say that wealth can be a curse as well as a blessing. If a wealthy person becomes a miser who hoards and gives only what he's not going to miss anyway, his wealth becomes a curse. Selfish greed makes salvation harder than fitting a camel through a needle's eye. But if the wealthy person considers it all a free gift, and offers it all back for the Lord to use, then it's a blessing. We've been blessed to know some people like that. Maybe you have, too.

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The widow's sacrifice was certainly not tiny in the eyes of Christ. Hers was an example of true worship, of love, faith, and absolute trust. And our Lord accounts such treasures in the spirit with which they are given. If we rely, even partly, on other security, we risk losing our allegiance to God. He doesn't expect us all to empty our bank accounts as much as He invites us to invest ourselves in Him, in body, mind, and spirit. When we do, our offerings that we return to His treasury will be spontaneously liberal and generous, and our lives will be lived in the spirit of true stewardship and discipleship.

As Jesus left the temple that day during Holy Week, His debates and His confrontations with the Scribes and Pharisees, the teachers of the Law, were finished. The next time He would appear in the temple, He would not even speak in His own defense. We know this, and it makes this final observation about thankful "giving" even more dramatic and profound. We know that He gave absolutely everything He had, even more than this poor widow, including His precious blood and His final, holy breath. He gave Himself as our portion, a level of giving we could never achieve, and the only truly worthy sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. As we ponder this gift, may it make our hearts sincerely thankful. Amen.

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And the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ abide in your hearts forever. Amen.

In my preparation for this sermon, I learned that the last of the WWI widows was put to rest just three months ago. Dorothy Ellis was actually born on Armistice Day, November 11. Today, would've been her 97th birthday. She evidently broke the pattern and married a much older veteran. In fact, she had been married to one of the men who inspired the movie "*War Horse*".