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Q&A#30 Is the Widow with the Two Mites a Positive Example of Sacrificial Giving

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Today's question: "The story of the widow and her two mites (Luke 21:1-4) is often used to commend sacrificial giving. However, the immediate context contains Jesus condemning the Scribes for "devouring widows' houses" and promising to destroy the temple. Is the story primarily about sacrificial giving? Or, is this story about a corrupt religious system that was devouring widows rather than caring and providing for them? The Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8 gave out of their poverty, but it was in response to the gospel and doesn't seem to have been their pennies."

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is from the Book of Luke. The story of the widow and her two mites is often used to commend sacrificial giving.

However, the immediate context contains Jesus condemning the scribes for devouring widows' houses and promising to destroy the temple. Is the story primarily about sacrificial giving, or is this story about a corrupt religious system that was devouring widows rather than caring and providing for them? The Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8 gave out of their poverty, but it was in response to the gospel and doesn't seem to have been their pennies. Well, I think the person who's asked this question has more or less answered it.

If you read the surrounding context, it sheds considerable light upon this little episode of the widow giving her two mites. I'll read from verse 45 of chapter 20 into verse 6 of 21. As for these things which you see, the days will come in which not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down.

So, taken within these sandwiching accounts, these sandwiching sections of the Book of Luke, I think the story of the widow and her mite, two mites, is seen as a national tragedy playing out on a small scale. But a small scale is far more devastating than it will be for the rich of the people. When you look at the story of the widow and her two mites, she is someone who would have been ignored.

She was someone who wouldn't have attracted much attention. What she gave was minuscule compared to the treasures that the rich poured into the treasury. But yet, Jesus sees what she gives as representing her entire livelihood, that what will be taken from her as the temple comes crashing down is far greater than what the rich will lose when that occurs.

Now, the rich will obviously lose in other ways as well, as the whole system of Jerusalem and Israel comes crashing down in AD 70. But this story of the widow is an illustration, first of all, of how the leaders of Israel were abusing and mistreating and oppressing the people. How the widow was giving up her livelihood in service of a corrupt religious system, a religious system that was not actually for her good, that was lining the pockets of the rich, that was giving power to the leaders of the people, that was building up this great building.

And all of those things will come crashing down, would be shown to be corrupt and will be condemned to destruction. And so there is a great national tragedy playing out on a small scale here, and Jesus wants his disciples to recognise that. He wants his disciples to see the tragedy of the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the tragedy of people who have been abused by religious leaders who are corrupt.

Now, Luke gives particular attention to characters of widows within his gospel, whether that's the persistent widow as the example of prayer, or whether it's the widow of Nain, or whether it's the widow Anna at the beginning that's encountered in the temple. Luke is attentive to the character of the widow, and I don't think that this is accidental. The widow is seen in some sense as a representation of the state of Israel.

That Israel itself is like a widow, a widow that has lost its husband and that needs protection and needs someone to come to its deliverance. And Christ is the one that comes to the deliverance of the widow. When we look at the widow's story again within its context, I think we can see some of the differences between this and other stories of so-called sacrificial giving within the New Testament.

So the Macedonians give out their poverty, but yet what seems to be the case is that

they are giving to the Jerusalem Christians who are in far greater need than they are. Now, they don't have much, the Macedonians don't, but they have enough to be able to give to people who are in even greater need. This is a different thing from giving money to the treasury in support of corrupt religious leadership and to a temple system that is about to be destroyed because of the wickedness that has taken place within it, not least the oppression that it represents.

And so there's a very significant difference here. Also, as you look at the leadership that Paul and others represent within the early church, it's a leadership that is not characterized by a quest for material gain. Paul's practice is to support himself for the most part through tent making and other things, not to be a burden upon people.

Now, he could ask, he knows that he has, he's in a position where he could ask for people to give him material support, and that would not be wrong for him to do. The workman is worthy of his hire. But Paul is primarily concerned to give the gospel to people to communicate God's truth and God's gift in Christ.

Now, giving then becomes a participation in the gift of Christ who for our sakes became poor so that we through his poverty might become rich. And part of our participation in that is to share in Christ giving that we give to others, that we give to those primarily who are in need. It's not about this service of rich leaders of the church, getting the private jet for the globetrotting evangelist or the mansion for some great health and wealth teacher.

Nor is it a matter of serving the building of these great monuments. There's nothing in principle wrong with building great monuments if it's not expropriating resources from the livelihood from the poor. There is something good about having a glorious church building, about a glorious cathedral.

I work in a cathedral on many occasions and there is something glorious and wonderful about that building. A building that represents the hearts of many people who have given to the creation and the maintenance and development of that building. And in their gifts they represent something of the value that they give to what that building stands for.

A building that draws people's attention up to God, that serves as a sanctuary for worship, that serves as a place for community and life together. Now people can often be dismissive of church buildings. The church is just people, it's not a building.

And in one sense that's true, but it's like talking about your marriage is not a bed, your marriage is not a table that you eat at together, your marriage is not a home that you live in together. Well in one sense yes, the marriage is primarily the relationship between a husband and a wife. But if you do not have a home, if you do not have a bed to share, if you do not have a table to eat at together, your life is pretty attenuated.

There's something that has been lost that is absolutely essential. And if you have a house that is an expression of your love, a place which is homely, then that's an enriching of your capacity to live in a glorious marriage. Likewise, a church building that draws people's attention up to God is not a bad thing.

But when those church buildings, when those temple buildings are built upon the oppression of the poor, upon an indifference towards the livelihood of widows, then there's a big problem. One of the things you notice within the early church in the Book of Acts, it notes that a number of the priests converted to the faith. And this is described in the context of the church's provision for widows, provision for those in need within her midst.

Now I think that's significant because the priests and the Levites were dependent upon the support of the people. And when you have this basis of charity there, and when you have a system that is not really supporting people in that sense, then they will naturally be attracted to a system that manifests a genuine care for the poor. And often the power of the Christian faith with the poor and the needy has been precisely in the fact that we are a house that cares for those in need within our midst.

And if we are a house that's just concerned about the exterior buildings that we are building and does not seek to care for the poor, then we're not truly taking care of the house, the house that really matters, which is the household of God, which is the people. Now those buildings are not unimportant as I've discussed, but they are not the thing of primary importance. The widow, the orphan, the stranger, the person in poverty, these are the people that need to be maintained as part of the maintaining of the house of God.

And so when we have all this, all of our resources put into extravagant buildings, into extravagant forms of life for our leaders, whatever it is, that is a very poor testimony to our true values. And it's something that brings God's condemnation upon us. God sees the orphan and the widow.

And we see this within Jesus' treatment here, that everyone else sees the great building. Jesus sees the widow who puts in her two mites. And as we see in the Old Testament, that God is the one who will avenge the orphan and the widow.

God is the one who hears what they say as they appeal against injustice. God's the one who hears the persistent widow. God's the one who hears the widow Anna in the temple.

And as a result, those who devour widows' houses, their house will be devoured too. Their house will be destroyed and brought low. The house that has been built upon injustice, upon taking from the poor.

It's a house of thieves in the sense that it is built upon expropriating the livelihood of the

poor. And that is something that God will respond to in judgment. Now the example as Christians that we should follow is the example of Christ, who for our sake became poor so that we might, through his poverty, might become rich.

As Christians are saved through Christ's action, we are given to give to others. And so God has given us his spirit. God gives the whole church his spirit.

But God also gives not just that one spiritual gift, but God represents that spirit. God has given us to represent that spiritual gift, that singular spiritual gift, through a multitude of spiritual gifts. Where each one of us has gifts that we use for the sake of everyone else.

And in those gifts we are sharing in God's giving process. Now this is significant because one of the things that Paul does is break down some of the dangerous structures that can develop in relationship to charity. First of all, that a form of charity that places people under our, that they are beholden to us in some sense.

That the person who gives to the poor gains power over them. Now this is within the ancient society that Jesus was speaking within. You gain power often by giving gifts.

And we can understand this maybe if you think of the mafia boss who gives you a gift that you can't repay. That's not a gift that you want to receive. It's a gift that puts you in his debt.

Whereas when Jesus talks about giving, when Paul talks about giving, this is a gift that God will repay. When Paul receives a great gift from the Philippians, he says, my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in Christ Jesus. It's a very striking response.

It's a response that says, I Paul am not indebted to you because of your gift. Rather, I am grateful for your gift, but it is God who will repay you. God is my guarantor for all the debts that I have.

God is the one who will repay them. That's a very significant thing to do. In the same way, when the book of Proverbs talks about giving to the poor, the one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord.

God will repay. It's not the poor that are placed in our debt. Rather, in a remarkable sense, God is placed in our debt.

God is the one who will repay. Now, when we talk about the gifts of the poor, we need to think about it in this terms as well. The poor, if they have nothing that they can give materially, we can often think that they are just rendered passive recipients.

But yet, if we think about this in a more Christian sense, the poor are given to give just as much as the rich are. The poor are those who can pray for the rich. That's one significant thing that they can do.

And this is not seen as something that they're not placed in people's debt. Rather, they are those who have God as their guarantor. They're those who can pray for the rich.

They can pray for the rich as those who are the recipients of God's gift. Now, there's a lot more that can be said on this. But the sort of giving practice that we see within many churches today is far closer to the widow and her mites than it is to the Macedonians that we see in 2 Corinthians 8. The Macedonians are those who voluntarily give out their poverty to those in even greater poverty, to those who express the unity of the church in those gifts.

It's not a gift up the hierarchy so that the people at the top can line their pockets and the buildings of the church can become glorious while the people languish without a livelihood. No, it's the giving of gifts from one part of the church, one body of believers to another, one set of Christians to another, when they are in greater need, when they're in a position when they most desperately need it. It's a sign of their being together as one people.

And Paul compares this to the account of the manor in Exodus 16. The one who gathered much had none left over and the one who gathered little had no lack. In the same way, the church provides for itself as people minister to each other, as those who are poor within our midst are seen as members of our household.

And if you have members in your household, you provide for them. That's one of the most basic duties that we have. If you have a child in your household, you don't expect them to earn their own living.

If you have an elderly relative in your household, you don't expect them to earn their own living. You provide for them. You provide for people according to their needs.

And within that sort of setting, you have to do your labour that you can, but you provide for people in their need. There's a sense of responsibility, obligation to each other. And that's a very different sort of thing from building up a house while allowing its inhabitants, those who are part of the household, to languish in poverty.

And so, as we apply this to the modern situation, I think we have a paradigm here that speaks powerfully against the practice of many health and wealth teachers in terms of finances. That the church, in its most public forms, in its most visible forms on television, screens and elsewhere, has been defined so much by financial exploitation, is a true shame and dishonour to the cause of Christ. As we look in the teaching of Christ, as we look in the example of Paul, for whom giving to the poor and collecting for the poor was an absolutely essential part of his ministry.

And if you look through the letters of Paul, how often does he talk about the collection that he's gathering for the poor saints in Jerusalem? How often does he talk about the

significance of ministering to the poor? It's all over the place, because this is central to what he's talking about. This is central to the realisation of some of the principles that he talks about. It's bound up with his idea of bringing together Jew and Gentile, that as the Gentiles have shared in the spiritual blessings of the Jews and as they have ministered to them, so the Gentiles give materially to the Jews when they're in need to express their unity in one body.

It's a very powerful theological proclamation. The giving of resources to the poor Jerusalem Christians, the poor Judean Christians, is a theological statement for Paul. It's a theological statement that Jews and Gentiles are bound together in one household.

And as members of one household, you take care for each other. You look out for each other when another person is in need, you act on their behalf. And so this vision that Paul presents within his epistles is a stark contrast, I think, to what Jesus condemns in the practice of the scribes, the leaders of the people, and what the temple building represents in that day.

Luke's attention to widows, Paul's attention to the proper form of charity that takes the example of Christ as its heart and shares in the giving process of God by the Spirit and recognises that our gifts to the poor are guaranteed by God, that God is the guarantor of the poor. All of these things inform a very different form of policy in our giving. It also informs a different approach to church leadership and how they get money.

So as we see Paul's practice, Paul's practice, Paul talks about the workman is worthy of his hire, talks about not muzzling the ox as it treads out the grain. It's important to pay the people that minister to us. But yet Paul does not take this as a right that he will avail himself of all the time.

When he's ministering to the Thessalonians, he ministers in a way that he provides for his own needs. So he's not dependent upon anyone else. He could require them to give him material resources as he ministers to them spiritually, but he doesn't do that.

The other thing that this reflects is the way that the gospel works. The gospel is not a system of coercion that puts us under pressure to give. The gospel is something that encourages cheerful giving, voluntary giving.

It's not as if there's no element of obligation, no sense of Christian duty to do it. But it's not expressed in terms of command so much as in terms of a gift that you have the possibility to give. That's a wonderful thing that God has given us in order that we might give to others.

And when you see Paul's practice here, I think it is quite a powerful example that we should follow in this regard. It's one that also recognises the power of the poor to minister to the rest of the church, even when they cannot do so materially. So the weight

that we place upon material gifts, upon money being given, I think will be considerably reduced when we have a proper understanding of giving.

We'll have a greater sense of how the poor widow ministers through her prayers, for instance. The ministry of Anna who prayed in the temple continuously. That is a far more powerful ministry for the building up of that house than the great wealth that was poured in into the treasury by the rich people.

Now, this condemnation of wicked forms of leadership that prey upon the poor is one that needs to be held in balance with all sorts of other things. We're not condemning great buildings. We're not condemning paying leaders.

We're not condemning the poor giving gifts. But what we are condemning is a system that's based upon oppression and expropriation of the poor's livelihood in order to build things up that are unconcerned for them. That are not characterized by a true heart for the poor, for a recognition that the house of God is primarily the people, the poor.

And it's defined by these people that need to be built up, to be part of this household. So if you've got a glorious house and there are people within it who are starving, it's not a glorious house at all. What God is looking for is us to build up the inside and the out.

That if we have an outside that's glorious and an inside that's rotting and corrupt, then the outside will be torn down in time. And if we've got very little exterior glory, but we have a true household within where people are concerned for each other and building each other up. There were no great churches, church buildings within the early church.

But what we see in the character of the Macedonians and in the Jerusalem Christians and elsewhere is a true household. It may not have a great building to inhabit, but it is a true household. And this is the sort of giving that the church should express.

Something that we can easily be distracted from, particularly in an age that is focused upon spectacle, upon exterior glories and upon the great ministry of powerful men. If you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. If you have found these videos helpful, please pass them on to your friends and encourage other people to watch them.

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