

Giving When You Have Little Yourself

William K. Lewis
Fairmont Presbyterian Church
College Ministry Team

One of the traits most often associated with college-age people is that they have rather limited financial resources. This is especially true of students, although budgets can be tight when first starting a career as well. In such times it can be easy to get discouraged and think that because our own finances are severely limited, that any donation we could possibly make to Christ's Church just wouldn't be of any significance. Whether or not our offering matters depends, I suppose, upon whether we use God's standards or our own.

In Mark 12:41-44, we are told about an offering that Jesus saw a poor woman make to the temple treasury. We are told that Jesus observed many wealthy people donating large amounts of money and that later a destitute widow put in just two small coins. We are not told the exact amounts of the large donations, but Mark is quite specific about the widow's offering: two lepta. It's difficult to calculate the exact equivalent of ancient Greek currency in modern money, but the monetary value of her contribution would be in the range of a few dollars. After watching the temple-goers make their donations, Christ explained to his disciples that the poor widow had given more than all the others; that while they had given a portion of their wealth, she had given everything - all she had to live on!

One thing that is so striking about this story is that the widow's contribution was not only proportionately greater than the others in terms of her resources, but also that her giving was sacrificial. That is, she was not giving out of her disposable income as were the others. She didn't have any disposable income. All of the money she had was just enough to buy a modest meal, and she gave all of it to the temple. And income for a woman in her position was far from

certain. To ancient ears, pointing out that a woman was a widow had special meaning. Remember that most ancient societies were patriarchal and property was passed down primarily through the male family members. Also, the family structure was virtually the only support system available for taking care of the elderly. If a woman had lost her husband and had no children of her own, she might find herself without any property or means of support. This frightening possibility is the reason for some of the interesting and unusual (to us) marriage customs found in the Old Testament. But I digress. Despite her poverty and uncertain prospects in life, the poor widow gave everything she had.

A perhaps less obvious aspect of this passage is that the widow's donation was meaningful, even though when combined with the much larger amounts donated by many others that day her contribution wasn't going to make much of a difference to the temple's finances one way or the other. In light of this, one might even wonder why Jesus did not counsel the woman to go ahead and keep her money on account of her extreme poverty and the fact that she might go hungry if she donated her grocery funds. But he didn't. He let her contribute like everyone else in the temple crowd, so there must be a reason. I believe that he didn't attempt to dissuade her because it wasn't important how big the donation was going to be *to the recipient*. But it was important how much good the gift was going to do *for the giver*. The widow had the opportunity to get that warm fuzzy feeling for having given something to her God. Had Jesus talked her out of it, she would have been denied that joy.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not advising you to give away everything you own, or to donate your grocery money and go hungry. How much and how often and to whom you give is between you and God. And I'm not telling you to give only token amounts in lieu of satisfying actual needs if you are able to do so. If you see a genuine need and are in a position to meet it, then by all means go ahead. But the point is that acts of generosity, no matter how small, really

are good for the giver too and certainly do not go unnoticed by God. Even if you have very little, a cheerfully-given gift, whether it is donated time or money or goods, matters a great deal. It matters to you, and it matters to God.

To tell the truth, I didn't fully appreciate this concept until I became a father. My children are still quite young, so they are dependent on their mother and I for everything they have. Consequently, they cannot possibly give us any material things that we could not easily get for ourselves. And yet, when my young son offers to share one of his juice boxes with me in case I might be thirsty, I find myself overcome with pride at his thoughtfulness and generosity. And it is the best-tasting drink in the whole world because my little boy gave it to me. It didn't matter what anyone else thought of his gift, or how many drinks were already in my refrigerator. His gift mattered to him, and it mattered to me.

I imagine that our Heavenly Father views us in much the same way. None of us can give to Him but a fraction of what He first gives to us. And just like that poor widow so long ago, it doesn't matter if your budget is tight and you have but a little to give. Nor does it matter how large or small your contribution might seem to others. If your gift matters to you, it matters to Him.