

Open Hands: Put Your Money Where Your Heart Is!

A sermon based on Mark 12:41-44 – ***“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. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.***

⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

September 22, 1776...that date mean anything to you? Ok, something with the Revolutionary War. You know, maybe it holds a little more significance for me, since it actually involves a family relation...way back! Anyways, a young colonial had been discovered and arrested as a spy, and he was due to be hanged by the British for his treason. That was when that young man, Captain Nathan Hale, rather famously stated (anyone know?!?), “I only regret, that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

Do you get what he meant? Had he been like a cat - having nine lives - he probably wouldn't have changed course much, if any, in any of those other lives...that's how strongly he felt for the cause. He'd be the person who you'd look at today and say, “Yes, this guy bleeds red, white, and blue.” There's no question where his heart was. His selfless sacrifice for his country proved it.

A selfless sacrifice...is what Jesus saw taking place in the Temple in Jerusalem on that day...Holy Tuesday – only a couple of days before Jesus went to the cross. You'd think he'd have bigger fish to fry...again, he was going to be dying in a couple of days, so maybe prepare himself for that. But no, he was casually sitting with his disciples, watching as the people came and dropped off their offerings to God.

So, you had the whole gamut of people giving – the middle class, the minimum-wagers, and then, especially the rich. They enjoyed this. They almost treated it as a show: “Just you watch as I come and drop off this huge bag of cash...no big deal.” But they didn't stop there. The original language gives us this insight: It seems as if the wealthy kept coming back to get in the offering line again and again, like, “Excuse me! Mr. Usher, can you run the plate past me a second time please? I forgot to put my OTHER envelope in!”

Ok, maybe a little conceited. But it looked far better than when, a little later, an elderly woman – a widow – slowly, yet firmly, walked up to the offering box and dropped in her offering, two small coins – about what you'd earn working six minutes in a day.

There was no pomp and praise. I imagine the rest of the disciples were either too busy chatting amongst themselves to notice or simply shrugged it off as being so insignificant. But Jesus noticed. And he stopped them at that moment. And here's what he said, ***“Truly I tell you, 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.” In other words, her offering was greater than theirs. Do you know why? They gave from their wealth. She gave from her heart.

Sit on that for a moment.

You know, Jesus’ words to his disciples are telling us something...something the Greek actually conveys quite well. Jesus wasn’t just watching as the people gave their offerings. He was studying them. Turns out Jesus was not only watching the amount of their gifts, but he was also staring right through to their hearts, seeing all their reasons for giving those offerings.

How would you like that? What if the solution to our money problems here was this...instead of passing the plate around and your offerings and your giving – if you’re giving– get to be anonymous...instead of that, one by one, you get to come up here, I’ll put the offering plates right there, and everyone gets to watch you – the act, the amount, all of it?!

Would you like that? Yeah, me neither. Although, maybe it would guilt us into giving and giving more, but that’s not the motivation...

You see, for Lutherans who have been trained to be discrete when we put our envelopes into the plate, the thought of everyone else sitting there, watching, staring, makes us more than a bit uncomfortable.

Maybe you would even say, or at least think, ““My giving is between me and God,” and you’re right. It is. But how easy is it to use that reason as a cover-up when I know my giving isn’t where it should be? Has that been you?

Again, you’re right. We don’t need to see. But Jesus is watching and staring and studying every time you have the opportunity to give. He sees if you do. He sees the amount. He sees your heart.

So, where is it?

Let’s try a little exercise. I want you to put down whatever you’re doing right now, and put up your hands where I can see them (you don’t have to throw them way up into the air). Ok, if you’re anything like me, what are your hands starting to naturally do? Form a fist. My hands actually shake as I try to hold them open.

Let your hands form the fists. What do you notice? My teeth clench, my eyebrows furl, my whole body is starting to tense up as my muscles tighten. I know my heartrate is starting to rise. I don’t feel good. Is that what you’re feeling, too?

When do we make a fist? When we’re angry, mad, scared, or feeling threatened. When we want to hold onto something and not lose our grip...when we’re being greedy. Right, the child who selfishly yells “Mine!” grabs the toys and holds it in a tight fist.

Is that what we’re doing with our money? “I worked hard for this. I earned this. It’s mine.” “God, I can’t give that much away to you. That will hurt me too much.” “God, you’ll be ok if I just hold on to a little bit more of this. I need it more than you do.”

Tight fist.

And that's when the giving starts to hurt, like someone trying to pry your fingers open. That's when giving feels like a burden...at least giving the way God wants us to and has been teaching us over these three weeks of our 10 for 10 program.

I wonder, would you have given the widow excuses to give her last two coins...had you been in Jesus' seat? "No, dearie! God's knows your heart. He knows you don't have two dimes to rub together. He knows how huge of a sacrifice this would be. He knows you'll give it someday—if you've got it. Hey, here's two more pennies. Go and buy yourself a cup of coffee." I'm willing to bet—at least two small copper coins—we would have done our best to talk the widow out of making her offering! And in so doing, we would have talked her out of doing the exact thing Jesus commended her for!

Do you understand my point? Could it be, just every now and then, we are far too eager to make pious-sounding excuses NOT to give and to be tight-fisted with our money and not nearly eager enough in being encouraged and in encouraging one another on toward godly generosity and open hands?

Why is that? I think it's because we've got this notion that our giving primarily has to do with the wallet when what Jesus is really watching is the attitude of our hearts and the actions that follow. Simply put: Do we trust God or don't we? Do we trust God enough to open up this heart and these hands or are they firmly and tightly closed? That's a "yes or no" question. When is the last time we opened up our hands and gave from the heart—gave as if we really trusted in God and staked our future on his promises?

Take this. How many thousands of dollars have you sent to Fidelity, Vanguard, Charles Schwab, Edward Jones through the years? Why? Because we TRUST these people will make our money grow. But have you noticed Charles Schwab makes no promises to us? Seriously! "Past performance is no guarantee of future results." Charles Schwab makes no promises. God does! 2 Corinthians 9(:11), ***"You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."*** Why are we so tempted to trust Fidelity more than our faithful Father? Why do we take comfort in our investments, but fear opening our hands and generously giving as a net loss? Jesus is watching our attitude and actions. What does he see?

I'll sum it up this way: There is only one reason why we fail to give God our firstfruits: He, simply put, isn't first in our hearts. There is one overriding reason why we don't practice the principle of proportionate giving: We've forgotten God is always the Ultimate Owner of Everything. There is one major reason why we fail to practice heartfelt giving: We don't believe God will truly care for us, despite all his promises.

You see, as with Captain Hale, we have only one life to live. This is it. An 80's rock song by 38 Special gave this advice, ***"If you cling too tightly, you're gonna lose control."*** That's the truth. For tightfisted hands and hearts, that's what we deserve right now...to lose control of our money...to lose control of everything.

Jesus knows your heart. Now see into his! Look back to the end of our First Lesson. There we see into the heart of Jesus, ***"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).***

You see, Jesus knows all about coins! When Satan tempted him with the wealth of the world, he told Satan to go away and eat dirt. When the money changers were fleecing the flock in the temple courts,

Jesus made a whip and drove them out...because this was a house of prayer, not a place of profit! Only days after sitting and watching the widow, Jesus would be kneeling and praying in Gethsemane—sold for coins of silver by Judas. Jesus never once thought a greedy thought, but human greed led directly to his crucifixion. And on that cross, Jesus bled and died to forgive the very hearts that loved copper more than Christ and silver more than the Savior!

On Good Friday, Jesus paid the entire sin debt and for the moment became even poorer than this poor widow. There, covered with the sins of all people of all time, Jesus lost any sense of worth or value before his heavenly Father...so much so God kicked him to the curb, turned his back on him, abandoned him, forsook him.

And Jesus? Look! On the cross, hands open, hell experienced, he breathed, “It is finished!” and died. And in that moment, the greatest riches ever became yours...forgiveness, salvation, forgiveness, perfection, forgiveness, heaven. Riches that, because of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, will never be taken away from you.

Riches that, even days before Jesus’ death, the widow knew she possessed. Riches that opened her heart to make a sacrifice surpassed only by her Savior’s sacrifice. He gave his life for her. She gave her all to him.

And you know what? Despite giving her all to God, she still had riches left. She had her Lord. She had her Lord’s forgiveness. She had God’s promises. She had God’s gift of faith to trust them.

The big point today? **This woman gave even beyond her ability, because she trusted her Lord’s ability to care for her.**

What does the mean for you...and me? Look at today’s theme. You know, we’ve been spending three weeks on one of the hardest teachings of God’s Word - stewardship... and it’s not because it’s difficult to understand, but because it’s so incredibly tough to put into practice.

There’s a saying among pastors that, when it comes to people outside of the church or even new believers, you “first convert the heart, then the wallet.” Do you understand? These days, it’s easier to lead someone to faith in Jesus than it is to show them the importance of giving generously to God with their offerings. It’s true.

But guess what? When Jesus has your heart, then he has your pocketbook. And Jesus has your heart, so he has your pocketbook as well. And, with Jesus having your heart and your pocketbook, here’s his challenge, “Put your money where your heart it.”

And, with Jesus having our hearts, that...it’s not even a challenge. More like it’s our joy. Try this. Put your hands up again. Clench them in a fist. Count to five. Now open them up. What do you notice? Your shoulders sink, your entire body relaxes, you take a deep breath, you feel at ease...your heart is at ease.

You know, where are we going to go from here? With hearts at ease, hands open, ready to give freely and generously, it’s here.

The widow gave, trusting God’s promises.

And we do the same. Because here is God's promise to you, ***"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:25-27).***

God promises, ***"The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing" (Psalm 145:15,16).***

God promises, ***"God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work...He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God" (2 Corinthians 9:8,10-11).***

So, now, equipped with God's promises, put your money where your heart is. The widow did. You can, too. And you will. I know it. Because I know who has your heart. And he's worth giving your best...and so much more.

And what a joy it will be when we stand before God's throne at the end, and like Nathan Hale, will gladly say, "No regrets. I had only one life to live, and I lived it for you...generous to you." No regrets. Only joy. Amen.

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