

The Three Givers

By Mark Jarvinen

A church group decided to take a trip to its mission field in South Korea. Among those who decided to go was a wealthy lawyer. The pastor asked him to take pictures of anything he thought was unusual. One day, while sightseeing in the Korean countryside, the lawyer saw a boy pulling a crude plow in a field, while an old man held the handles in his hands. Amused, the lawyer snapped a photo.

Commenting to the guide, the lawyer said, ***“That was an unusual sight. I suppose they are very poor.”***

The guide replied, ***“Yes, I suppose you could say that. When the church was being built in this area last year, they wanted to give something to help with the building project, but they had no money, so they sold their only ox and gave the money to the church. This spring they are taking turns pulling the plow themselves.”***

The lawyer paused, and then said thoughtfully, ***“That must have been a real sacrifice.”***

The guide replied, ***“They did not call it that. They thought they were blessed to have an ox to sell.”***

... Upon returning home, the lawyer showed the picture to his pastor and said, ***“Until I took this picture, I never understood sacrificial giving. I’ve come to realize that any giving I’ve ever done has never cost me anything. My giving has never before involved my heart. Pastor, God is changing me.”***

Today's text contains a few short verses describing a brief moment during the last week of Jesus' earthly life. It's ironic that this event is included in The **Gospel of Mark**, the briefest and least detailed of all the Gospels. Even John's Gospel, the most extensive record of Jesus' own words, doesn't mention it. One has to believe that there's important, life-changing truth revealed in this brief passage. Let's consider **Mark 12:38-44** around the theme: "**The Three Givers.**"

³⁸ And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹ and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹ And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Let's look at the first category of givers ...

I. THE RICH

Jesus is likely referring to the "**scribes**" of vv. **38-39**, the teachers of the law, who, dressed for success in their luxurious, long robes, were greeted widely in the marketplaces, and were given the best seats in the house, whether it be at synagogue or social event.

They were among the **“rich”** mentioned in **v. 41**, who made a great spectacle of putting large sums of money into the temple coffers with great flourish and fanfare.

However, from his seat opposite the temple treasury, Jesus knew the hearts of the rich. He saw through their masquerade.

a) Jesus knew how they had obtained their wealth. Verse 40 says they were those who **“devour widows’ houses,”** suggesting ill-gotten gain at the expense of the most needy.

b) Jesus could read their motives for giving. By playing to the people and enjoying their own prestige, the scribes acted like they were doing God and the people a favor by giving. Their giving was a means by which to enhance their own carefully honed image in the eyes of others.

c) Jesus understood that their offerings were not actually sacrificial. Although significant in amount, their gifts came out of their excess, leaving plenty leftover for themselves.

To that point, in the late 1990’s, I remember hearing how wealthy media mogul, **Ted Turner**, pledged to the United Nations \$1 billion over a 10 year period from his personal wealth, in order to help them address some of the world’s most challenging problems. I was duly impressed in learning that this was one of the largest single philanthropic gifts of all time. To be sure, it was a wonderful humanitarian gesture, which Turner had hoped would encourage other people of means to follow suit. However, a while later, I learned that Mr. Turner’s gift was actually only 9 months worth of interest

accrued from the rest of his vast holdings. Was his gift sacrificial? Was he motivated by love? I'm glad it's not our place to judge what constitutes true generosity.

Now, let's look at another category of giver ...

II. A WIDOW

In contrast to the rich giving their significant sums, Jesus pointed out a widow to his disciples, who quietly dropped into the treasury box her two small copper coins. How much were these coins worth? Pat Cook suggests the coins were called "**lepta**" in the currency of the day, worth about 1/16th of a soldier's meager daily pay. (Sermon Central). In **v. 44**, Jesus said it was "***all she had to live on.***" It sounds like it was hand to mouth, subsistence living, for this widow. Yet, she gave. She gave with no fanfare. She was likely unnoticed as she slipped into the temple that day. Her meager amount hardly made a sound as she dropped her two small coins into the treasury. But Jesus saw what she did! He recognized her level of sacrifice. He understood the costliness of her gift. Some give what they will not miss. Some give what doesn't hurt them to go without. Someone once said, "**When it comes to giving, some people will stop at nothing.**" Do you catch the play on words there? 😊

The giving of the widow in this incident was different than the giving of the rich. Jesus commended her way of giving. You see, in God's economy of grace, one lady putting in a penny could very well be worth more than a rich man putting in 1000 times as much. In God's scheme of reality, a penny given by one person can actually be

more valuable than \$100 given by another, or \$1 billion by yet another. Jesus taught His disciples that day that it's not the amount given, but the attitude with which it's given that matters most. This widow's giving was merely a manifestation of the attitude of her heart. She was giving to God her whole heart. What's cool about this is that just like the little Korean boy pulling the plow that I mentioned at the outset of today's message, this widow's focus wasn't on the sacrificial nature of her giving. Rather, her giving was simply in response to God's love for her.

This leads to the 3rd giver in this text ...

III. JESUS

Jesus was simply watching all those who were giving at the temple on that particular day. Perhaps he was doing nothing more than taking a break with His disciples. But His greatest act of giving would take place about a week later when He gave His life on the cross for you and for me.

The epistle lesson for today is found in **Hebrews 9:24-28** and it says something very important to us about the giving Jesus did for us on the cross:

²⁴ For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶ for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages

to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Here we are taught that Jesus is our true High Priest, One who having ascended to the Father after His death and resurrection, now regularly intercedes for us, pleading our case before the Father, like a defense attorney, reminding Him that our sins are under the blood of the cross, paid for in full.

Jesus' death on the cross was a once and for all sacrifice, unlike the sacrifices offered by the High Priests of OT times, who, on the Day of Atonement, once each year, would go into the Holy Place in the temple with the blood of an animal to make an atoning sacrifice for the sins of all Israel. The author of Hebrews goes on to say that all of mankind dies a physical death only once and then faces judgment. Jesus died on the cross, only once, to bear the penalty of human sin in His body, and will take home to heaven all those who, in faith, have awaited His coming.

What a gift bestowed by Jesus! This is the promise bestowed on us in our baptism. In baptism, our sin nature is buried with Christ in His death, and in His resurrection we too receive a new nature and are raised to newness of life. **(see Romans 6:3-4)**. Jesus came to earth the first time to deal with our sin problem by voluntarily giving up His life on the cross. He's coming again to take us home,

whether at the time of our own departure from this world in death, or at the Day of His Appearing.

CONCLUSION

To sum it all up, there's only one way to heaven, and that's by faith, receiving Jesus, like a beggar receiving a gift from a King. The only way we can even think about giving to God, is in response to the greatest gift of all that He has so freely given us in Christ. We give to God and to others, whether it be with our time, our talents, or our treasures; not as a favor to God or others, not so we can earn anything in God's eyes, or the eyes of others, but as an expression of thanks to God for all that He has given to us in Christ.

Allow me to close with this **modern day parable**:
“Once upon a time, a **chicken** and a **pig** were walking down the street and noticed a sign announcing a fund-raising breakfast at a local church that coming weekend. At the bottom of the sign the menu for the breakfast was included: **‘Ham and eggs served from 7-9 a.m.’** The chicken turned to the pig and said, **‘Hey, maybe we could be of service at this breakfast.’**

The pig replied, **“Yes, we could, but your service would only be a contribution, mine would be a total SACRIFICE!”**

Jesus gave His all for us – a total sacrifice of Himself on the cross. We give only in response to His gift to us, so that others, along with us, may share in its gracious benefits. **A-men.**