

## Giving 101: Giving With All Your Mite by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*"... her last two cents."*

### Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief.

Amen.

### Background

Last week we found ourselves in the **Court of the Gentiles** where Jesus turned over the money changers' tables and chairs in the temple to bring the focus back on worship and justice. This week we find ourselves in another segment of the temple—the **Court of the Women**.

In between these courts was the **Gate Beautiful**. It was here that Jesus sat on a bench, people-watching. I find this picture of Jesus utterly fascinating—Jesus, the observant and curious onlooker. He even positioned himself opposite the treasury for a better vantage point. Like an anthropologist doing fieldwork, he took mental notes on how people gave.

The **Court of Women** in the temple had thirteen collection chests called "the trumpets" because each one was in the shape of a trumpet.

These thirteen offering boxes would go towards the purchase of various line items budgeted for the temple sacrifices:

- a box for turtle dove sacrifices
- a box for new shekel dues, old shekel dues
- a box for wood offerings, frankincense offerings, gold offerings
- other boxes for the purchase of corn, wine, and oil, and
- other freewill offerings.

All these were gifts to the temple to help fund sacrifices.

Many people came up to give, a number of whom were well-to-do, giving generous gifts that were a true blessing. But one lone individual in particular grabbed Jesus' attention—a poor widow.

Now poverty was unfortunately common for most widows in the ancient world. Jesus always upheld the dignity of the poor, but it wasn't an easy life.



I like how the milkman Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof" put it:

*"Oh dear Lord, you made many, many poor people, I realize of course that it's no shame to be poor. But it's no great honor either!"*

Well, Jesus saw the poor widow and honored her. And he challenges us to notice and learn from her also. Widows, orphans, strangers, refugees, singles—we need to see and celebrate these folks, recognizing and receiving the gifts they bring to the table.

And so as we hear this short and powerful story, let us ask ourselves:

- What are we doing with our money? Our time?
- How do we see others?
- How do we view other people's gifts? Our own gifts?
- How do we see gifts to the church, large and small?
- And do we live out of an abundance of faith, or out of a scarcity of faith?

So let's look now at the poor widow who gave with all her "mite." Let's sit and learn from this poor widow, who is a spiritual giant, towering over us all.

### Scripture: Mark 12:41-44 (KJV)

And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much.

And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing.

And he called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them,

Verily I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

### SERMON – Giving 101: Giving With All Your Mite

I was a not quite starving suburban seminary student, who worked part-time as a server at the Olive Garden Restaurant—you know, back when we used to eat in restaurants. My fellow servers nicknamed me Father John, even though I'm a good Protestant.

One afternoon my shift just ended. It was a slow day. I counted my tip money and gave a portion to the bus boy and the bartender.

Now Marco the bartender was hilarious. Everybody loved Marco. He would pretend that the kitchen was a fashion show and would strut down the catwalk with a scarf as we made salads or picked up our orders. Some jokingly made catcalls at his animated performance. Well that day, none of my tables ordered drinks, but I still wanted to give Marco a tip. So I gave him not two pennies, but a whopping two quarters. As I handed Marco the tip, he gazed down upon the two silver (not green) George Washingtons in his hand. He looked at his two coins, looked up at me, looked back down at the two quarters and said in a hushed tone, "John, these two quarters are like two golden nuggets coming from you." We both shared a hearty laugh.

I love this story about not only Marco, but today's story in the gospel according to Mark. We get a penny for Jesus' thoughts about giving. And like Marco, Jesus saw the poor widow's mites as "two golden nuggets." So I'm going to throw in my 2 cents worth to hopefully make this delightful story about giving make even more "cents" for us.

First, notice that there are all kinds of people in the temple. Rich, poor, and probably everything in between. This is good. A healthy temple and a healthy church will have it all. People of all socio-economic stations in life are welcome. Affluent, cash strapped, and middle class—we need it all. We also have people of all stripes and plaids—formal dressers, business casual, casual, and scrubby. All are welcome. All have something to contribute. Jesus looks at the heart. So must we.

1 Samuel 16:7 says it best,

*"... for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."* (KJV)

Second, I love how Jesus makes this poor widow a paragon of giving. Whether we're rich, poor, young, old, or somewhere in between, this poor widow continues to teach us volumes about giving over the last two thousand years and counting. She's a living legend, an inductee to The Hall of Giving. This tiny widow is a powerhouse, a mighty giver who gave with all her mite. And so she courageously shows us what total commitment to God looks like—reckless abandonment. She took the ultimate trust fall into God's loving arms.

This mighty woman of God teaches us how to give—courageously, faithfully, wholeheartedly, and sacrificially. The NRSV translation says she gave her whole life—not just two coins. She could have given no pennies, or just one penny. But she gave her last two. She gave everything.

The prophet Zechariah asks us,

*"Who dares despise the day of small things...?"*

Part of the small things are small gifts that we're not to despise, but honor. And really, when given from the heart, there is no such thing as a small gift.

There was a story from the ancient rabbis about a priest who looked scornfully at a woman's gift of a handful of flour, saying "What sort of offering is that? What is there in it for eating or for sacrifice?" But that night in a dream it was said to the priest:

*"Despise not the poor woman, but reckon it as if she had offered herself as a sacrifice."*

We give thanks to God for all gifts, no matter their form. And we give thanks to those who give them. Granted, if we have a fearful and risk-averse faith, we can be like the man who buried his one talent in the ground. It was his fear and his skewed view of God that led him to hold on to what was entrusted to him to multiply. We don't want to follow his example.

So what Jesus is getting at is that every gift sacrificially given, no matter the amount—large or small, is a treasure in heaven, deposited here on earth.

### **So what is a mite, anyway?**

The KJV uses the word "mite" for the two copper coins the widow gave. A mite was the smallest coin used in England in 1611 when the KJV was first released. Like a bad penny, the term "mite" has stuck through the centuries. The Greek word for mite is "lepton" which means a small green man. *No wait, that's leprechaun! Sorry.* Lepton means "thin one."

The mite was the smallest of coins that were in circulation at the time—both in size and worth. A mite was 1/64 of a denarius. A denarius was a day's pay. If my math is right, that's eight minutes of pay, for an eight-hour workday. One lepton was a half-penny, so her two mites totaled one penny.

Put it this way, if you see a coin on the ground, how much does it need to be worth for you to take the time to pick it up? I'd pick up maybe a dime, definitely a quarter. I've read that for Bill Gates, if he dropped \$10,000, maybe it would be worth his effort to pick it up.

Well, the poor widow was not just down to her last dime, she was down to her last penny. And she gave it all away, dropping not one but her two small coins into the trumpet chest. It's important to remember, this story isn't so much about the amount of giving, it's about the heart of giving, the joy of giving, the motive of giving, the sacrifice of giving, the generosity of giving. It's about the attitude of gratitude, how you see the world, how you see your life, and how you understand God. Although her giving created hardship, it increased her joy.

Psalm 4:7 says,

*"You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound." (NRSV)*

The widow was poor, but she had gladness in her heart because she gave. Life was a gift to her. And it is more joyful to give, than to what? ...receive. Her gift was NOT an expression of her neediness, even though she was certainly destitute. Her gift was an expression of her gratitude and trust in God. So it's her faith and trust and generosity that are the real treasure here.

The poor widow was the richest woman on earth when it came to doling out generosity, gratitude, and joy. It was contagious. She is the gift that keeps giving. The poor widow was the Warren Buffet of devotion to God. This nameless widow is one of the great saints in all of the Bible, all of church history. I want to be like her. She lived the abundant life, even in her poverty. Her treasure couldn't be measured by the size of her checking account, 401K, or her net worth. She gave not out of hypocrisy or show, but out of authenticity and integrity. She was all in, holding nothing back. She went for broke. Jesus saw that in her spirit, from a mile away. He wanted the disciples not to miss this golden opportunity. Jesus called a time out, and huddled up with the disciples. This was a teaching moment. *"Truly I say to you." "Verily, I say unto you."* These are Jesus' words in the Greek,

*"AMEN I say to you."*

Literally it is the AMEN that we say to conclude our prayers. Amen means "SO BE IT"!

So whenever you hear AMEN on the lips of Jesus, you better lean in and listen up close. For those of us who are old enough to remember, it's like the EF Hutton TV ad: "When EF Hutton talks... people listen."

You can bank on Jesus' wealth of knowledge, so listen up:

*"Verily I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: for all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living."*

In other words, she gave not just her two cents worth—she tossed her life into that offering box. Sometimes you've got to think outside the box, other times you need to live inside the box, the giving box.

The old widow foreshadowed what Christ soon would do on the cross. She emptied not only her pockets, but she emptied herself. She poured everything into her giving and trusted God. Put it all on

the line. Let it all hang out. 110% of mind, body, soul, might, understanding, and resources. Every ounce of her being. She upped the ante and was all in. She not only shot for the moon, she shot for the Son of Man.

Notice also how Jesus celebrated her giving. He didn't tell her she shouldn't give, keep your money. No, she was a woman of worth, she had something to give that no one else had.

Jesus invites us today to throw in whatever we have in our varying levels: our two cents, our crumbs, our five loaves and two fish. He wants your personal drop in the bucket. Jesus wants you to put your dent into it. He wants it. He takes it seriously. It all counts, it all adds up, it's all needed. Every penny counts. It's all pennies from heaven—and God owns it all. Everything we have, we first received from God. Jesus wants us to give our all back to him, to give our lives to him. Jesus receives it, blesses it, multiplies it, and uses it for the kingdom of God.

So, follow the poor widow's lead and lay it all down. Drop your fishing nets and safety nets. Relinquish your great expectations and your grand designs. Give to God your life, your everything. Lay it all before God as an offering, with all your "mite." The affluent gave out of their wealth, but the widow gave out of her poverty. The well-to-do gave out of surplus and abundance, she out of her lack. Though poor, she was rich. Or as hip hop artist Lecrae sings, "*Being broke made me rich.*"

This woman did what Jesus commanded the rich young ruler to do: sell all and give to the poor. She did it joyfully, but he walked away sad. Those that gave out of their surplus, their faith cost them little. But this widow who gave out of her lack, her piety was priceless.

This is the same principle Jesus talks about other places: The last will be first. If you want to be the greatest, be the least, become a servant. It is counterintuitive: we receive by our release. "*Store up for yourselves,*" says Jesus, "*treasures in heaven...*" We store up, by giving up, and giving away.

Jesus has another important message for us: Everybody has something to contribute. Everybody. We all have something of value to offer. We all have worth and dignity as children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ. Whether rich or poor, give your best, give your all. Give yourself. This is a command for everybody—I don't care what your tax bracket is. Jesus summons all of us: "

*"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

That's how Jesus lived. Paul tells us,

*"For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." 2 Corinthians 8:9*

Whether our gift is small or large, let's give big and live large. All donations are of value. Our big sacrifices and our small sacrifices all matter. They all count in the arithmetic and accounting of heaven—every penny, every red cent. The mundane and the magnificent. They're all the greatest gift when they're given in faith, hope, and love. From the heart and not for show.

Our giving has the opportunity to sow seeds of love, joy, and gratitude—no matter the size or the way they are delivered.

Evangelist Dwight L. Moody put it this way:

*"I don't care about money's pedigree, I just care about its destiny."*

Every good gift is sacred and it's all to God's glory, not our own. We're stewards, trustees to receive from God, reflect God's glory, and return it all back to him. We don't own it—we never did.

**So here is a Summary of "Giving 101":**

- **Giving is proportional** to your means—it will be different for each person. Generosity is not a one-size fits all.
- **Giving is to be sacrificial.** A good way to guide your giving is to give until it hurts. You need to feel the presence and weight of your giving in your budget. If you can't tell you're giving, you're not giving enough. So within your means, stretch yourself and take the leap of faith.
- **Giving is to be consistent and deliberate**—a regular discipline in your life. It's a spiritual discipline to regularly give of your time, talents, treasure, and the temple of your body. It builds your faith muscles. It builds up the Body of Christ, too. Giving is good for the body and the soul.
- **Giving is to be heartfelt, not compulsory.** God loves a cheerful what? Giver.
- **Giving is an act of trust.** Give your gift to God, no strings attached. Don't hold back or hold out. And don't take it back from God.
- **Giving is an act of worship,** an expression of our love for God.

Jesus gives us clues how we are not to give:

Don't give ostentatiously, or to control, or for wrong motives.

Jesus also gives us a clue as to how we are to give:

Be sincere, devout, generous, and free in your giving. Bless to be a blessing. Freely you've received, freely give.

When any gift is given in love and devotion, no gift to God is insignificant. And it delights God.

Rich or poor, we all stand equally before God's command to love with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Gifts given generously and faithfully, whether large or small, are big gifts, valuable gifts, and pleasing to God gifts.

So let us sit at the feet of Jesus, and learn from the rich and generous faith of the poor old widow.

Amen.

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