

Natalie W. Bell
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Living Generously
Mark 12:41-44

*Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A **poor widow** came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a **penny**. ⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their **abundance**; but she out of her **poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.**”*

When I was in high school I went on a couple of *mission trips to a border town* in Mexico called Nuevo Laredo.

There we built a school and a health clinic—
in the middle of an incredibly impoverished little village.
By impoverished, I mean that people
were *living in the middle of a city trash dump*.

The residents lived in *little lean-tos* that I will never forget—
with walls made from scraps of metal,
old barrels to collect rainwater for drinking and cooking and cleaning,
old tires for chairs and toys,
and ratty mattresses and fabric for sleeping.

And there we met the *most amazing Christians*—
people with few possessions,
but tons of faith in Jesus Christ.
And their *worship was like a big party* every week—
it made you want to get up and dance, like so many of them!
People were on their feet, clapping, playing tambourines,
smiling and laughing!

One day a few of us were *invited to the home of Maria*,
after we finished our building and painting at the school.
She was insistent on feeding us at her home.
And we had no idea what that meant.

She was a small woman with a big smile, and a big heart—
exuberant in her faith and gratitude to us for working in her village.

When we went to her home, we were *so humbled by what we saw*.
She had an old skillet over an open flame to prepare our meal.
And we could see that dinner was cactus—
we had seen cactus growing along an old fence at the dump.
I saw her take that cactus and before she cut it up for her frying pan,
she carefully pulled out the needles, with her bare calloused hands,
smiling and talking to us, the whole time.

I can't even tell you what an *impact* this had on my privileged life
as a high schooler in suburban America.
This woman who literally had nothing,
was *giving so generously* of what she did have.

I couldn't help but think of her when I read the story
of the *widow's offering* this week.

This is a *challenging* story.
But there are some important details.
We know that she's a widow, and widows had very few resources, if any.
And we know these are her *last two coins*.

But what if this story is *not just about giving away your last dime*?
Would Jesus tell *her* to do that?
Would it be unethical to say that God wants you to give your last penny,
Especially as a widow?
I mean, God encouraged people to support widows, orphans, and the poor!

And just before this, in verse 40,
Jesus condemns the religious leaders who *'devour widow's houses'*!
In other words, the religious establishment was not caring for the least of these.

So, what if there is another *side* to the widow's gift?

Do you remember how God uses *a widow to provide for* the prophet *Elijah*
with a never-ending jug of oil and jar of flour?
Remember that story?

In 1 Kings 17, *Elijah meets a widow with a young son*, and Elijah asks her to cook for him.

She says that she has only enough food to prepare a last meal for her and her son before they die!

But somehow, because of her faithfulness, she feeds Elijah, And then, her little jug of oil and jar of flour do not run out! God miraculously provides.

A widow in Biblical times *had to rely upon* men in her life for support, like perhaps her deceased husband's brother, if there is one.

But if there is no family or no children, or if the children are too young to earn a living, then a widow is *entirely dependent* upon charity.

The Bible is full of provisions for *struggling groups* of people, like: widows, orphans, and immigrants— because they were not able to provide for themselves.

So, what if that's part of this story?

What if she reminds us of an important fact in our lives.

What if the fact that *everything she has is a GIFT*, is important to our understanding of her story?

Now, we *proud, individualistic Americans don't like* to think this way— about everything we have being a *GIFT from God*.

We *think* it's all ours.

We earned it, so we own it, right?

But is that really true?

For widows in Biblical times, it was *all a GIFT from God*.

What if we knew that all *WE HAVE* is a gift?

Presbyterian pastor Rev. Dr. Cynthia Campbell spoke at a stewardship conference That I attended several years ago. And she said something really profound:

One of the tropes in our political life is opposition to so-called "entitlement" programs. We think that people should earn what they get in life; all of us have. We don't want to be beholden.

We don't want welfare.

We want to earn our keep.

Because if you EARN it, you OWN it.

*All of which is fine, (she says)
until you remember that in fact all of us are beneficiaries
of the **biggest “entitlement program” in the universe.***

*You and I did not earn the right to be alive.
Life is nothing more and nothing less than a completely **free gift.**
And so, dear friends, is **salvation.**
What God has given us in Jesus Christ is God’s own self.
We **cannot earn this** and we **do not own it.**
It is a **gift from God’s immeasurable abundance.***

Cynthia Campbell, Stewardship Kaleidoscope opening worship sermon, March 2016.

I had never heard it put quite that way before, have you?
That We are all the beneficiaries of the biggest entitlement program in the
universe?
But, isn’t that true?

What if there are really just **TWO ways to look** at what you have in life,
either as belonging to **YOU**--and you can do what you wish.
Or as belonging to **GOD**--
And you are a steward, or caretaker of the gifts.

See the difference?
If you think it’s all **yours**,
you think that giving to God is **giving YOUR stuff away.**

If you know it’s all **God’s**,
then giving to God is **returning** what is already God’s to begin with.
And it’s giving out of **GRATITUDE.**
It’s like bringing more talents back to the landowner in Matthew 25.

Remember that story?

The master gives 5 talents to a servant, then 2 to another,
and finally 1 talent to the last servant.
The person with five talents **used it and made five more.**
Similarly with the one who had two talents **made two more.**
But the one who received only one talent **buried his money**, didn’t use it,
and brought it right back to the master upon his return, complaining all the while.
The ones who used their talents to make more were the **faithful** ones, and we are
called to **do likewise.**

If we know that what we have is a **gift** from God---
 It's **easier** to be **generous**, isn't it?
 It's easier to give the best to God.
 If it's God's, you want to give God the best!
First fruits is what the Bible calls this kind of giving.

I wonder, what **would OUR lives be like** if we lived that way?
 Giving first?
 Giving the best?
 Knowing that it's all God's—and feeling grateful!

It so reminds me of **Maria in Mexico**.
 She knew her whole life depended upon God.
 And so, she gave freely and joyfully—out of gratitude!

We are so rich that we forget that God has given us everything,
 So we think it's ours, and we keep it. We hoard it.
 We don't want to share it.

I once read that the widow's gift is symbolic,
 of **giving your LIFE to God**.
 Because Jesus said that she **put in EVERYTHING she had**, *all she had to live on*.

Isn't **that our Christian call**—to give our **LIVES** to God?
 So that we might find the meaning of real life?

Paul puts it this way in 1 Timothy 6:17-19
*As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, 19 thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the **life that really is life**.*

What does that kind of **real life** look like to you?
 How do **you feel** when you give your life to God?
 When has giving your life brought you **purpose, and joy**?

And have you experienced that *unique math* of God's kingdom?
That when we give, there is somehow,
more than enough, enough to share and give?

When have you seen *God pour out blessings because you gave?*
Remember Malachi 3:10 last week: *Bring the full tithe into the storehouseand see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down an overflowing blessing.*

When we give, aren't we *blessed in ways we can't imagine?*
When we give, don't we *GROW*—
because we are a part of something so much bigger than ourselves?

And giving leads to something else, too.
It leads to an *AWARENESS of those around us.*
And the fact that we should *live simply* so others can simply live.
God wants us to give, and share—*so that others have enough, not just us.*
That's what Paul's talking about in 2 Corinthians we heard today.

Being CONTENT with what we have is important, too.
Contentment is about accepting what we have,
instead of always wanting more and more.

Christian author Philip Yancey writes about a spiritual seeker
who interrupted his busy life to spend a few days in a *monastery.*
"I hope your stay is a blessed one,"
said the monk who showed the visitor to his cell.
"If you need anything, let us know,
and we'll teach you how to live WITHOUT it."
Philip Yancey, "What 147 Elk Taught Me About Prayer," Christianity Today (March 2006).

Isn't that the truth?
Most of what we *have*, we do not need.
Most of what we *want*, we do not need.
What we do need is an *awareness* of others.
And a *relationship* with Jesus Christ--
the only one who can help us *separate our wants and needs.*
The one who can help us *find life, through giving.*
Giving of our time, talent, and treasure.

When I think of the *widow's gift*,
And the gifts of my *friend in Mexico*,
I am *humbled*.

Because they gave so *generously*—when I all too often give so sparingly.
I give out of abundance, they gave out of poverty.

But their GIVING inspires me to give more. And more freely.
Because they know that all we have is really a *gift* from God.
And we are merely asked to care for God's gifts,
to give some back,
and to use it all for the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven.

Friends, hear the *Good News of the Gospel* for us today:
We are called to *give our lives* to God—
To give *generously* of our *time, talent, and treasure*—
Not out of obligation,
But out of *gratitude, humility,*
and an awareness that all of life is really a *gift*.
For the gift, all God's people can say, Amen.