

The Widow's Might

Sermon by Dr. Jim Gilchrist

November 8, 2009



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15210
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org

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He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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 (Mark 12:41-44).

It's Jesus' last week on earth. He's told his disciples, but they don't get it. It's amazing, in retrospect, how little they understand – and all the more amazing that, when they tell the story, they sound so clueless. You'd think they might have cleaned it up a bit, made themselves look better. But no, they tell it like it is. And so the gospel drips with irony.

On Sunday Jesus rides into town on a donkey – the King of kings and the Word of God on a creature whose name is a synonym for stupidity. The crowd shouts "Hosanna!" but crowds are fickle. In a few days, when the governor asks what to do with Jesus, they'll shout something altogether different.

Jesus' first stop is the temple. He looks around, watching what's become of religion. But it's getting late, so he heads for the suburbs, back to Bethany to spend the night. Next day, on the way into town, he's hungry. He sees a fig tree, but it has no figs. It's not the tree's fault; it isn't even fig season. No matter. Jesus says, as though the tree belonged to him, "No one will ever eat from you again!" The disciples think that's a little harsh.

Jesus goes back to the temple, drives out the sellers and the buyers, and turns the tables on the money changers and the merchants. He quotes scripture – "My house shall be called a house of prayer" – but he sounds as if this house were *his*. That kind of talk, besides upsetting the dove cart, infuriates the chief priests and the scribes. They think *they* run the temple, after all. So the people in charge of religion plan to kill the Son of God. But they're afraid of Jesus – not

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because they know who he is, but because the crowd still loves him. So they start to scheme, while Jesus goes back to Bethany for another night.

Next morning, Jesus and the disciples pass the fig tree again. Peter says, "Rabbi, look! The tree you cursed is all withered!" Jesus says, "Have faith in God." Then he adds, with some hyperbole, "I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be thrown into the sea,' it will be done for you." But if you want God to do things for you, you'd better do what God wants. "Whenever you pray, forgive, so that your Father in heaven will forgive you." Forgiveness is on the short list of what God wants.

Now the chief priests and scribes ask, "Who do you think you are? By what authority do you do these things?" More irony. They wouldn't know the Son of God if he were staring them in the face.

So Jesus spins a parable, and not a very subtle one, about a man who owns a vineyard. When the owner sends a slave to collect his share of the produce, the tenants beat him up. The owner sends another slave, and they beat him up too. He sends a third, and the tenants kill him. Time and time again, the owner's agents get beat up or killed. Finally, he says, "I'll send my son. Surely they'll respect him." But no, they kill the heir, thinking now they can keep the vineyard for themselves. "What do you suppose the owner will do to those tenants?" Jesus asks. The chief priests and scribes get the point, but only part of it. They know he's talking about them, and it just makes them all the madder – in both senses. Their anger makes them crazy. So they set out to do the very thing the parable says: they plan to kill the son.

They send their henchmen to trap Jesus. First, some Pharisees and Herodians, cronies of the king. "Tell us, Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" If he says yes, he'll annoy the people who hate the emperor; if he says no, they'll nail him for sedition. "Bring me a coin," Jesus says. "Whose head is on it?" "The emperor's." "Then give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and to God what belongs to God." This has nothing to do with separation of church and state; it's about how dumb it is to mess with Jesus. They go away dumbfounded. Their arms are too short to box with God.

Next up, some Sadducees, who say there's no such thing as a resurrection. They spin a parable of their own, about seven brothers who marry the same woman after each of them dies in turn. "So, Jesus, whose wife will she be in heaven?" Gotcha, they think. But Jesus says, "You don't know anything. In heaven they

neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels" – which, by the way, is why the marriage vow is till death do you part. "And as for the dead being raised, the scriptures say God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of the living, not the dead. You don't know what you're talking about."

Now there is one man in the crowd who isn't out to get Jesus. He really wants to know what God wants. "Which commandment is the first of all?" he asks. "What matters most?" Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. No commandment is greater than these." The man thinks about it, and he says, "You're right! That matters more than all the ritual and everything else." Finally, someone is beginning to understand. Jesus says, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

This man happens to be a scribe, but in general the scribes are not so sympathetic. "Watch out for them," Jesus says. "They like to go around in long robes, and be greeted with respect, and enjoy the best seats in the synagogues. But they devour widows' houses. They take advantage of the poor, though they pray long prayers to keep up appearances. They will be condemned all the more."

Now, after putting those who try to trap him in their place, and finding one man who catches on, and warning about the hypocrites, Jesus sits down by the treasury. He watches the people passing by, putting their offerings in the plate. Lots of rich people contribute fairly large sums, but then Jesus sees something remarkable. A poor widow pulls out a couple of coins and drops them in the offering plate.

"Boys, come here!" Jesus says. "Look at that! I tell you, this poor widow put in more than all the others. They gave out of their abundance, but she gave out of her poverty. She put in everything she had, all she had to live on!"

There aren't many people who impress Jesus, but this woman is one of them. He's been thinking about what it means to give all you have, thinking about sacrifice. Thinking about all the people who don't get it, who have no idea who he is, or how much this week is going to cost. He thinks about those who turn religion into one more consumer commodity, who show up mostly to get something out of it – earthly blessings and heavenly bliss as a return on their

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modest investment. But this woman gives everything she has for the sake of God. She has a heart like Jesus' heart.

If you listen closely, you can catch the reaction of some who overhear Jesus' praise for this poor woman. "First of all," says the man in the long robe, "we're the ones who pay the lion's share. We keep this temple afloat. The widow's pennies are all well and good, but if it wasn't for us this place couldn't exist. And besides, people like her rely on alms from people like us. If it wasn't for us, she wouldn't survive either. If we gave away all that we had, somebody else would have to take care of us!"

What the man says is true, but it's largely beside the point. For one thing, there's no chance whatsoever that he's going to give up everything and become like the poor widow. He likes using that argument, precisely because it's entirely hypothetical; it's not going to happen. Of course he contributes many more shekels than she does, but it's not hard for him to do that. It doesn't seriously impact his lifestyle, and he gets to be known as a pillar of the temple. And besides, the poor woman did not choose her lot in life. In Jesus' day, women are largely excluded from the means to earn a living, even if they're able to work. The bottom line is, the rich man would never trade places with the poor widow, even if he finds Jesus' praise of her more than a little annoying.

For Jesus, it's all about proportionality: what do we do with what we've been given? From those to whom much has been given, much is expected. The woman can't help it that her husband died, or that, as a result, she depends on others just to get by. Most people hate being dependent – not least because other people look down on them. This poor woman can't give what rich people give, but she wants to do something good for God. Instead of *getting* something she can use, she wants to *be* something God can use. So she gives all she has. No one can do more than that.

And it warms the heart of Jesus to see such a thing. He's come to give all that he has too. He's come to give himself, and no one has a clue how much that is. "He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped," Paul says, "but emptied himself out, taking the form of a slave, and being obedient, even to death upon a cross." Whatever we give in our most generous moments, it's nothing compared to what Jesus gives.

Remember, Jesus begins the week with the parable of the vineyard. The vineyard belongs to the owner, not the tenants, so when the tenants clamor to

keep as much as they can for themselves, they're fighting over what's not really theirs in the first place. It all belongs to God.

This week our nation celebrates Veterans' Day, a time to remember some others who gave all they had. People of every rank make sacrifices in war, but casualties come disproportionately from the lowest-ranking officers and enlisted people. The last full measure is still *full*, when it's all you have to give, whatever your rank or station in life.

Something like that is true in the great cosmic battle too. This whole life is one long battle between sin and selfishness, on the one hand, and love and generosity, on the other. Every time somebody gives all she has to give, or does all he can do, for the sake of the kingdom, God gains a little ground.

Now Jesus and his disciples walk away from the treasury, still thinking about the poor widow and what she has done. One of the disciples gazes around at the temple and says, "Look, Teacher, what large stones, and what large buildings!" Jesus says, "You see these great buildings? I tell you, not one of them will be left standing. Not one stone will be left on top of another. It will all be thrown down." Preposterous as it sounds, forty years later, that's exactly what happens. The Romans put down a rebellion, and devastate Jerusalem, and just to be sure everyone knows who rules this world, they tear down the temple.

But appearances are deceiving. The real strength in this world lies not in big buildings or powerful people, but in the souls of those who love God. The best of them don't hold back. They don't make excuses. They give all they have, and all that they are, for the one who owns everything – the one who becomes like us, that we may become like him.