

The study of <u>Luke 21:1-4</u>, with its parallel in <u>Mark 12:41-44</u>, provides us a window into the way institutional Judaism worked at the beginning of the Christian era. The episode centers on Jesus' comments about the sacrificial giving of a peasant Jewish widow over against the giving of wealthy Jewish worshippers in the temple. From the example of this lady and Jesus' comments about her, we can glean a model for Christian giving today, along with some important insights about our money.

I. Context

Both the historical and literary settings for this episode are important to the understanding of this episode. Two of the four gospel writers record the episode -- Mark and Luke -- while the other two -- John and Matthew -- omit this episode from their story of Jesus.

a. Historical

The historical setting for this episode is on Tuesday of the final week of Jesus' earthly life before his crucifixion on Friday. According to the synoptic gospel writers -- Matthew, Mark, and Luke [John omits any reference to activity on this day in his narrative.] -- this day was the busy day of all of them once Jesus had arrived in Bethany on the previous Friday. The day was filled with controversy and teaching, most of which took place on the grounds of the temple in Jerusalem.

A brief listing of events by these synoptic writers will illustrate this point well (Source: "<u>The Life of Christ</u> in <u>Historical Outline</u>" at Cranfordville.com under Bible Studies):

Matthew 21:23-26:16

Mark 11:19-14:11

- 129. Objections raised by Sanhedrin 21:23
- 130. Dilemma of John's authority 21:24-27
- 131. Parable of the two sons 21:28-32
- 132. Parable of the wicked tenants 21:33-46
- 133. Parable of the great supper 22:1-14
- 134. Paying taxes to Caesar 22:15-22
- 135. Question about the resurrection 22:23-33
- 136. The greatest commandment 22:34-40
- 137. David's son 22:41-46
- 138. Denouncing the scribes and Pharisees 23:1-36
- 139. Lament over Jerusalem 23:37-39
- 140. Temple destruction predicted 24:1-2
- 141. Signs of the Times 24:3-31
- 142. Lesson of the fig tree 24:32-35
- 143. The unknown day and hour 24:36-44144. Parable of the unfaithful servant 24:45-51

- 64. Lessons from the fig tree 11:19-2565. Objections raised by Sanhedrin 11:27-28
- 66. Dilemma of John's authority 11:29-33
- 67. Parable of the wicked tenants 12:1-12
- 68. Paying taxes to Caesar 12:13-17
- 69. Question about the resurrection 12:18-27
- 70. The greatest commandment 12:28-34
- 71. David's son 12:35-37
- 72. Denouncing the scribes 12:38-40
- 73. The widow's offering 12:41-44
- 74. Temple destruction predicted 13:1-2
- 75. Signs of the times 13:3-27
- 76. Lesson of the fig tree 13:28-31
- 77. The unknown day and hour 13:32-37
- 78. Plot of the Sanhedrin 14:1-2

80. Betrayal agreement 14:10-11

- Luke 20:1-22:6
- 123. Objections raised by Sanhedrin 20:1-2
- 124. Dilemma of John's authority 20:3-8
- 125. Parable of the wicked tenants 20:9-18
- 126. Paying taxes to Caesar 20:19-26
- 127. Question about the resurrection 20:27-40
- 128. David's son 20:41-44
- 129. Denouncing the scribes 20:45-47
- 130. The widow's offering 21:1-4
- 131. Temple destruction predicted 21:5-6
- 132. Signs of the times 21:7-28
- 133. Lesson of the fig tree 21:29-33
- 134. Be ready 21:34-36
- 135. Teaching ministry in the temple 21:37-38
- 136. Plot of the Sanhedrin 22:1-2
- 137. Betrayal agreement 22:3-6

- 145. Parable of the ten virgins 25:1-12
- 146. Parable of the talents 25:13-30
- 147. Judgment of the sheep and goats 25:31-46
- 148. Prediction of death 26:1-2
- 149. Plot of the Sanhedrin 26:3-5

151. Betrayal agreement 26:14-16

The sequence of events on that Tuesday begins with objections to Jesus' teaching by the Sanhedrin and concludes with the betrayal agreement with Judas growing out of the plot by the Sanhedrin to get rid of Jesus. All three gospel writers record a series of confrontations with Jesus by the religious leaders of the Jewish people that began early Tuesday morning and lasted throughout the afternoon. Jesus observation of the widow contributing her two pennies is the last action to take place in the precincts of the temple that day. According to Mk. 13:1, the subsequent events took place as Jesus and the twelve were leaving the temple to return to Bethany where they were spending the night.



An important historical question arises: Where in the temple did the episode with the widow take place? The temple in Jesus' day was a huge complex located in the northeastern section of Jerusalem. As the pictures of a reconstructed model of the temple illustrate on the left, Herod's temple was an elaborate structure comprised of many segments. The chart below lays out the basic design of the facility so that we can more easily understand where the event in our scripture passage took place. Al-

though this event could

have taken place in the "Court of Gentiles" more likely it occurred in the "Court of Women." The term $\gamma \alpha \zeta_{O} \phi \nu \lambda \dot{\alpha} \kappa_{IOV}$ (gadzophulakion) translated as 'treasury' referred to some thirteen brass chests often called 'trumpets' because of the shape of the opening where temple worshippers placed their offerings. These chests were located in the "Court of Women" where Jewish women were confined in their worship. Jewish men entered into the inner court where the great altar was located (item 5 on drawing). These collection boxes were located around the outer limits of the Court of Women. Which one of these our widow used is not specified, but is not significant to the story. These offerings were mostly used to provide funds to feed the poor and hungry.

One has to use his imagination to see the significance of this event. With thirteen such collection boxes made out of copper, and literally thousands of worshippers dropping in coins all day long on that Tuesday, the noise from the clanging coins rolling down the tubes into the boxes below must have created quite a sound. The wealthy mentioned in the text made a point of dropping in large sums of coins. The point was to call attention to themselves and their large contribution to help the poor. Much of Jewish religious principle



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operated from the assumption that the more people who saw you showing religious devotion the more God must notice your devotion and thus be more pleased with you. Thus the two small coins dropped in by the widow barely created a sound in comparison. To this situation Jesus directed his comments.

b. Literary

One important literary contextual issue has to do with the pericopes occurring just before and after the one about the widow. In both Mark (#s 72 and 74 in list on previous page) and Luke (#s 129 and 131 in that same list), Jesus had strongly denounced the scribes for religious hypocrisy. In it he mentioned their 'devouring widow's houses' as an indication of their worthless show of religion. Now both gospel writers place Jesus' comments on the significant contribution of the widow immediately following this denunciation of the religious leaders.

Mk. 12:38-40. 38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Lk. 20:45-47. 45 In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, 46 "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. 47 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

It should be noted from comparing the list of pericopes on page one, that Matthew moves a different way in his sequencing of these events. After the comment about "David's Son" (<u>Mt. 22:41-46</u> [#137] paralleled by <u>Mk. 12:35-37</u> [#71] and <u>Luke 20:41-44</u> [#128]), Matthew provides a much longer denunciation of both the scribes and Pharisees (<u>23:1-36</u> [#138]) and instead of the widow's gift episode inserts an expression of grief by Jesus over the impending doom of Jerusalem (<u>23:37-39</u> [#139]).

Immediately following the episode about the widow, comes Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple by all three gospel writers (<u>Mt. 24:1-2</u> [#140]; <u>Mk. 13:1-2</u> [#74]; <u>Lk. 21:5-6</u> [#131]).

Mt. 24:1-2. 1 As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 Then he asked them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." **Mk. 13:1-2.** 1 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2 Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Lk. 21:5-6. 5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

The net effect of this literary setting is to stress the pristine sincerity of the widow, in contrast to the hypocrisy of the wealthy and the corruption of the temple by the religious leaders. Her devotion to God stood out as a ray of light in the midst of much darkness hovering over the Jewish temple. Jesus' prediction of the temple's destruction was realized barely forty years later when the Roman armies under the command of General Titus completely razed the city and the temple itself, leaving everything in ruins.

II. Message

Both Mark and Luke develop their narratives around two points: the giving of the wealthy Jewish worshippers and the gift of the poor widow. Jesus both noticed and commented on the giving of both.

a. The gifts of the rich

Mk. 12:41 Καὶ καθίσας κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου ἐθεώρει πῶς ὁ ὄχλος βάλλει **Mk. 12:41**. He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the

Lk 21:1 'Αναβλέψας δὲ εἶδεν τοὺς βάλλοντας εἰς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον τὰ δῶρα αὐτῶν πλουσίους. **Lk. 21:1** He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury;

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χαλκόν είς τὸ
                      treasury. Many rich
                      people put in large sums.
γαζοφυλάκιον. καί
πολλοί πλούσιοι
ἕβαλλον πολλά·
Comments:
In Mark's depiction, this section flows along the following lines:
           And
              having sit down
                          over against the treasury
1
      he was watching
                         how the crowd was casting their money
                                                 into the treasury
           and
      many wealthy individuals were casting in many coins
2
But in Luke's depiction, notice how this scene is set up:
           But
            when he looked up
1
      he saw
              the wealthy casting their gifts
                             into the treasury
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Luke, who had access to Mark's gospel when he wrote his, chose to cut straight to the point of the wealthy and their giving, omitting the somewhat introductory statement 1 of Mark. Mark's inclusion of Jesus' watching this process underscores the earlier point of public giving of money for the poor as a parading of one's piety before people in the belief that this meant God would surely see and honor it with special blessing.

The goal for the giving of these gifts ideally was so that the temple officials would have adequate funds to help out those in need. Ancient Judaism took great pride in taking care of its own people. If members of the community were unable to care for themselves, the Jewish community would assume the responsibility for doing this. This structure in the temple was but one of several ways the people of Jesus' day sought to carry out the OT mandates of caring for the poor. This stood in contrast to the almost complete disinterest of the Greco-Roman world, which was often very callous in its treatment of the poor and helpless.

Thus the problem here is not in the wealthy giving their money to help those in need. To the contrary, this was required by the OT law. In fact, these wealthy people were giving quite generously of their funds. This much is to their credit.

What was wrong then? In part, the problem lay in motivation behind their giving. From many ancient Jewish and Christian sources it becomes clear that a false theology underlay their giving. In simple terms it tended to flow along these lines: God's law says give; I must give if I'm going to please God, since my eternal salvation depends on it. But how can I know that God knows I'm giving? It must be that if a maximum number of people see me giving, then God surely takes notice and will bless me for it. Thus, as I give in the temple, I must make certain that as many people as possible notice how much I give.

Thus quite a spectacle was created at 'offering time.' Jesus alluded to it in Mt. 6:2 (NRSV): "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward."

What can we learn from this? For one thing, Jesus is watching! He knows both what we give, and more importantly why we give it. As he went on to declare in the Sermon on the Mount in Mt. 6:3-4 (NRSV): "3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." That is, our focus is to be on

expressing genuine devotion to God, not -- as some German friends of mine say -- wearing our religion on our coat sleaves. Genuine devotion to God will shine through; we don't need bumper stickers to make it shine.

b. The gift of the widow

Mk. 12:42-44. <12:42> καὶ ἐλθοῦσα μία χήρα πτωχὴ ἔβαλεν λεπτὰ δύο, ὅ ἐστιν κοδράντης. <12:43> καì προσκαλεσάμενος τούς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ότι ή χήρα αύτη ή πτωχή πλεῖον πάντων ἔβαλεν των βαλλόντων είς τὸ γαζοφυλάκιον <12:44> πάντες γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς έβαλον, αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τῆς ύστερήσεως αὐτῆς πάντα ὄσα εἶχεν ἔβαλεν ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς.

Mk. 12:42-44. 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."

Lk. 21:2-4. 21:2 εἶδεν δέ τινα χήραν πενιχράν βάλλουσαν έκεῖ λεπτὰ δύο, 21:3 καὶ εἶπεν, 'Αληθῶς λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἡ χήρα αὕτη ἡ πτωχὴ πλεῖον πάντων ἔβαλεν. 21:4 πάντες γὰρ οὗτοι έκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς ἔβαλον εἰς τὰ δῶρα, αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τοῦ ύστερήματος αύτῆς πάντα τὸν βίον ὃν εἶγεν ἕβαλεν.

Lk. 21:2-4. 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4 for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

Comments:

Note again the contrastive ways Mark and Luke set up the main point of this episode. Mk. 12:42-44

and and a second s

having come

3 a very poor widow cast in two lepta

which is a kodrantes and

having summoned his disciples

he said to them,

Truly I tell you that this poor widow has cast in more

than all those

/-----|

who are casting into the treasury

for

out of their abundance

all were casting in

but

out of her substance

she has cast in everything

even her whole life.

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Lk. 21:2-4
      but
  he saw a certain poor widow casting in there two lepta
2
      and
 he said
3
             Indeed
         I tell you that this poor widow has cast in more
                              than all
             for
                      out of their abundance
         all these were casting
                     in their gifts,
             but
         she has cast in her life
                     what she has.
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The act of giving is highlighted by both gospel writers. She contributed two lepta, which Mark felt compelled to explain to his Roman readers was a kodrantes. I transliterate the two Greek words here instead of translate because this ancient coinage has little parallel in modern American coinage. A lepta was valued then at about one half of a Roman quadrans (kodrantes in Greek). It would have taken 128 quadrans to make a denarius, which was a typical day's wage. The point is the very small value of the two coins the widow put in the collection box. Yet, according to both Mark and Luke, this small amount was all she had available at that time to try to buy food to eat.

Both Mark and Luke make two points about her gift. (1) It represented more value in the eyes of God than the large sums of money contributed by the wealthy. (2) The reason this was so is because the true gauge of giving is not measure by how much one gives. Rather, it is measured by what is left over after giving. The wealthy gave out of their abundance and had a lot left over after giving. She had little to give and had nothing left over after giving.

What motivated this widow? Unlike the wealthy, she had no desire to 'put on a show' with her giving. They made little, if any sacrifice, in their giving. The widow made an extreme sacrifice. Evidently, because she sincerely loved God and wanted to quietly show it to her Heavenly Father. No pretentiousness involved here.

What can we learn here? The widow challenges us dramatically. Her priorities were in proper order. Love God and be willing to show it to Him sacrificially and concretely. The pompousness of the wealthy is of little genuine spiritual value. No real spiritual benefit was derived by their pattern of giving. But the widow is the one commended by the Lord. His commendation, rather than that of others, is the only thing that ultimately matters.