

INTRODUCTION

My younger brother, Dan, and I are a lot alike. He serves as a Minister of Education and Senior Adults at a church in Conway, Arkansas. One thing we have in common is that we both have a sense of humor leaning toward puns and groaners. You've endured plenty of my groaners through the years, but Dan, is a lot worse than me. A few days ago he sent me a funny list of Vincent van Gogh's imaginary relatives. If these are bad, blame my brother.

Did you know that Vincent van Gogh had a dizzy aunt named Verti Gogh? His magician uncle was named Where Diddy Gogh? His Mexican uncle was named A Mee Gogh. His rock star cousin was named Ring Gogh. His banker uncle was Wells Far Gogh. His dancing cousin was named Tang Gogh and he had a Chinese bird-loving cousin named Fla Ming Gogh. His RV traveling aunt was named Winnie Bae Gogh. And finally, mercifully, His aunt who taught positive thinking was named Way To Gogh!

So Dan and I have a lot in common. But when we come to our passage in Mark today, there are two sections that seem to have nothing in common. They seem to be totally unrelated. First Jesus expressed disgust at the Jewish religious leaders who were hypocrites. Then immediately following, we find the beautiful story of the widow who gave two pennies—all she had—in the Temple Treasury. At first glance it may seem that these two passages are randomly placed. But there is a reason God put them together. This is a message of a stark contrast between religious hypocrites and a faithful woman. The hypocrites were show-offs seeking attention. And the unnamed, unnoticed widow was neglected and ignored by everyone, except Jesus. The religious show-offs were mostly interested in what they could GET out of life. And the poor widow as interested in all she could GIVE. The show-offs received the condemnation from the Lord. And the wonderful widow received an eternal commendation from the Lord.

So, as we study these two contrasting pictures, it should be our desire to avoid the attitude of the hypocrites, and to adopt the action of the widow. So, let's consider two truths:

I. SHOW-OFF RELIGION IS DISGUSTING TO JESUS

Have you ever known someone who acted like a show-off? In the dictionary to show off is defined as "to make a deliberate or pretentious display of one's abilities or accomplishments." The harshest words of Jesus were directed toward these religious show-offs. As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely." (Mark 12:38-40)

I've said many times that I don't really care for religion. True Christianity is all about a personal relationship with God. The English word "religion" comes from the Latin words "re" which means to repeat and *ligare*, which means "to bind." Our word ligament comes from that root; and a ligament binds a muscle to the bone. Religion is man's effort to get reconnected to God. But Christianity is God's effort to reconnect to us.

Jesus had a lot to say about people who are religious hypocrites. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full." (Matthew 6:5) Here are two symptoms of show-off religion.

A. Show-off religion is concerned with outward appearance

Jesus said these show-offs loved to walk around in flowing robes. They wanted people to notice them by how they dressed. There's nothing wrong with wearing nice clothes to church, but if you do it so people will think you're religious, you just became a show-off.

I grew up being taught that you had to dress up for church. My dad was a forester for International Paper Company—he drove a pickup truck and wore khakis and boots to work. The only time he ever wore a tie was to church. But by the time we drove out of the church parking lot, he had pulled it off. He always said we should dress up for church because God deserves our very best. I didn't argue with him, I just clipped on my little tie every Sunday. But like my dad, I always took it off in the car on the way home. I've often said that the definition of a hypocrite is a man who says he likes wearing a tie. That's why we don't have a dress code at Green Acres.

A preacher from a Baptist church visited a family and invited them to church. The family said they didn't have any nice clothes to wear. So the pastor talked to some of his members and they took up an offering and bought the family some really nice clothes. The next Sunday the family didn't show up at church. On Monday, the Baptist preacher knocked on their door to ask why they weren't in church. The husband said, "Well, we got up on Sunday morning and put on those fancy new clothes. And we looked so nice that we decided to go to the Episcopal Church instead!"

Jesus was saying inward purity has nothing to do with outward appearance. Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. You need to examine your heart and make sure when you are dressing up to come to church you aren't thinking more about what other people will say about your clothes than about what God will say about your character. Show-off Religion is concerned with outward appearances.

B. Show-off religion loves public recognition

Jesus said the religious leaders loved being greeted in the market place and loved sitting at the seats of honor at the banquets. To them, their religion gave them a special status in their community. In the Jewish religious community, there was a very clear "pecking order." The more important a person was, the more recognition they were given.

Some Christians perform their religious acts because they want some kind of recognition. I learned this lesson in a painful way. When I was serving my first church out of seminary, we started sending out a weekly newsletter. After Vacation Bible School one summer I listed the names of some workers who had worked to make it such a success for the kids. I made the mistake of accidentally omitting the name of one lady who had helped with the refreshments. This lady stopped coming to our church and wrote me a vitriolic letter for leaving her name off

of the list. I made the shocking discovery that some people want to be recognized for their religious acts—and if they don't get public recognition, they are gone. That's show-off religion. Jesus completed His verbal salvo by saying the people who practice show-off religion will be punished most severely. The sins of these religious men were not the gross sins of the flesh; they were the sins of pride, greed, selfishness, and hostility. These are what may be called "religious sins." And in stark contrast to this passage, we discover in the next few verses that:

II. SACRIFICIAL GIVING DELIGHTS JESUS

This episode is a welcome relief for Jesus. Remember, this is the last week before the cross, and he has been debating and battling the Jewish mafia. I can imagine these constant confrontations caused Him great misery. But this unnamed widow was a source of blessing to the Lord. His praise of her memorialized her action for all eternity and she is the matron saint for the millions of believers who don't have much money, but they give generously to the Lord's work.

Let's read about her in Mark 12:41-44: "Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.'"

We know exactly where this took place because Josephus provided a detailed description of the Temple during the time of Jesus. The treasury was actually thirteen offering shofars build into a wall running beside the Court of the Women. Seven shofars were for tithes and six were for free-will offerings. They were called shofars because they resembled a horn made from a ram's horn that the Jews would blow to signal religious holidays. All the souvenir shops in Israel sell shofars today. Last year, my brother Dan picked one up and said, "Shofar sho good."

Remember, this was during the Passover Festival, so there would have been thousands of pilgrims in the city and almost all of them would have been making offerings. It was a good spot to sit and people watch. As we explore this passage, let's learn three things about Jesus.

A. Jesus watches when you give

Jesus wasn't just there to watch people. He was watching people make their offerings. Jesus is interested in what people do with their money. There's nothing evil about money. Some people think the Bible says, "Money is the root of all evil." But no, that's not in the Bible. The Bible says that the LOVE of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Money is a great servant, but a poor master.

Jesus watched as the wealthy give their large gifts. There's nothing wrong with giving a large offering to the Lord. If God has blessed you with great wealth, then it is right for you to give large gifts to God. Where would churches and ministries be today if wealthy people hadn't given generously? If God has blessed you with large financial resources, I encourage you to give it now to support God's work. Don't just leave it for your kids to fuss over.

But not only did Jesus see the wealthy giving their large gifts, He saw a widow giving two small copper coins. I doubt the other disciples or the priests even noticed her tiny offering, but Jesus was watching and He said she gave MORE than anyone else.

And just as Jesus watched those people give that day, He is interested in our giving. G. Campbell Morgan was a famous British pastor of Westminster Chapel in London. On the Sunday he was going to preach on this passage, he did something unusual during the offering. As the plates were being passed, he stepped out of the pulpit and walked down the center aisle and look down every row as the people were giving their offerings. Some of the people were offended, but as he preached on this passage he reminded the people that Jesus really was watching when they give. He was pretty brave.

In reality, I don't know how much anyone in this church gives—I don't want to know. I'm afraid if I knew, I would be tempted in my flesh to look at some of you with favoritism and to look at others of you and say, "Why don't you get with the program!" I don't know what you give, or even IF you give, but God knows. God is watching. He's right here in the Person of His Holy Spirit. The Bible says, "The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." (2 Chronicles 16:9)

He's looking at your heart and Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:21) God doesn't need your money. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and He owns the hills too. God is interested in what you give because giving is an expression of your love. He doesn't want your offering—He wants you. You can give without loving, but you cannot LOVE without giving.

B. Jesus knows your tough circumstances

Because Jesus is God, He knows all things. Jesus observed two things about this widow that only He would know. He said she gave out of her poverty, and she gave all she had. We often assume that she is an older lady, but widows come in all ages. The American artist James Christensen has a painting called "The Widow's Mite." He portrayed her as a young widow. I like the fact that the artist has her surrounded by Pharisees who are practicing their show-off religion.

Jesus knows everything about you, too. He knows all the good, the bad and the ugly. In John 4, Jesus was talking to another woman at a well in Samaria. Jesus asked her for a drink of water and then offered to give her living water so she would never be thirsty again. He said to her, "Go call your husband." She said, "Sir, I don't have a husband." Jesus said, "That's true! You've had five husbands. And the guy you're living with now isn't your husband." Whoa! Jesus wasn't condemning her; He was just letting her know He knew just how thirsty she really was. How did He know all that? He is God. Before the day was over, this woman had tasted the Living Water and was a different woman. She invited her friends to meet Jesus by saying, "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did." (John 4:29)

God knows your situation. He knows if you are struggling. He loves you. You say, "Pastor, if God loves me and knows my situation, why is He allowing me to face such tough times?" I can't answer that for you. But it is interesting Jesus knew this widow was alone, she was poor, and she

had just given away her last two pennies. Why didn't He do something for her? He did. He honored her. God's payday doesn't always come in this life. But as Dr. R.G. Lee used to say, there will be a payday someday for everyone.

If you're going through a tough time right now, I have a word for you. It's found in Psalm 34:18. The Bible says, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." God never says your heart won't break. He never promises your spirit won't be crushed. But He says, "I'm aware of your pain. I know what you're feeling. I care. I'll help you through it." You may be battling cancer right now. Some of you are still grieving because someone you love has died. Others of you are out of work; you need a job. Some of you are dealing with children who are behaving in a way that makes you wonder if someone exchanged babies with you when they were born. Some of you are tired from being the primary care giver to a sick loved one. I could go on for hours...and I still might not name your tough circumstance. But God knows, and He cares.

C. Jesus appreciates the value of a sacrifice

We don't read that Jesus commented on anyone else's offering. But when He saw the widow's gift, He got excited. He uttered an interjection. In the NIV He says, "Truly I say to you." But it's the word, "Amen!" I can just imagine Jesus saying to Peter, "Hey Rocky, did you see that offering? It's the biggest one I've seen given today!" Peter might have said, "Who's offering? I saw Reuven the Rich guy drop in a pound of gold. Is that who you're talking about?" And Jesus said, "No. I'm talking about that poor widow who is walking away. Amen! She gave more than all the silver and gold given today. Those guys gave out of their riches, but she gave ALL she had. That's what I call an offering!"

If the priests had compiled a list of givers, she would have been the last name of their list. But she was the first one on the list that really matters: God's list.

God has a different valuation system than we do. We think \$100 is more than \$1.00. God doesn't just look at the size of your gift, He looks at what you have left over after you give. A person could give \$100 and still have \$1,000 to spend. But when someone gives their last dollar, that grabs heaven's attention. God's value system is different. When I was a kid, my Uncle Charles used to play a game with me. He'd hold out a dime and nickel and say, "Which one would you rather have?" Of course, a nickel is larger than a dime, but the dime is worth twice as much. I would choose the nickel, and Uncle Charles would laugh and give me the nickel. Every visit, we'd play the nickel/dime game. Finally, my older sister, Judy, said, "You know a dime is worth more, why don't you choose it?" I said, "Because the first time I choose the dime, he'll stop playing the game and my supply of nickels will end!"

A few years ago, Microsoft founder, Bill Gates, received a lot of attention because he and his wife donated \$100 million to combat global AIDS. The world says that's a huge gift. But his net worth last month was \$83 billion, down from over \$100 billion last year because of the stock market decline. \$100 million is .1% of his net worth. Many of you in this church are tithers, so you give ten times more than Bill Gates gave. And this widow gave 100%.

This was a real sacrifice because by giving all she had, she was forced to depend on God. We'll never know until we get to heaven what happened to this widow, but I think we can say with certainty that she didn't starve to death, and didn't become a beggar. King David made this observation about God's provision in Psalm 37:25, "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread."

Have you ever given something to God that was such a sacrifice you had to say, "God, unless you take care of me, I'm sunk? Lord, I can't make it without You." As the song says, "When you come to the place where He's all you've got; you'll find He's all you need!"

CONCLUSION

Jesus honored this widow because He really knew about sacrifice. As He watched the widow place her two pennies in the offering box, He was mindful that in just a few days He would be paying the ultimate sacrifice. Within 72 hours, Jesus knew He would be nailed to an old rugged cross, and would sacrifice the priceless silver of His tears and the precious gold of His blood. When you look at the cross, the only response is to say, "Lord, like this poor widow, I want to surrender everything I have and everything I am to you."

Isaac Watts wrote a beautiful song in 1707 The first verse says, "When I survey the wondrous cross; on which the prince of glory died; My richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride." The final verse is my favorite. It says, "Were the whole realm of nature mine; that were a present far too small; Love so amazing so divine; demands my soul, my life, my all!"

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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