

Preach Text 19th January 2014

If you have got your Bibles with can you turn to the book of Mark,

Mark 12 verses 41 to 44

The Widow's Offering

⁴¹ 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. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few pence.

⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on.'

=====

Jesus uses this opportunity, of a widow putting money into the temple treasury, to teach His disciples, and us, about Gods perspective on giving.

Jesus shows us that rather than looking at how much we give, God looks at firstly the circumstances in which we give and secondly He looks at how much we keep for ourselves

The first thing that Jesus focuses on is the giver rather than the gift. (**verse 43**)

The giver is a poor widow. The significance of this would not have been lost on the disciples because most widows in Biblical times were probably the most underprivileged group of people you could find.

Just to help you understand I am going to give you a couple of quotes:

The first is from **Smiths Bible Dictionary**:

"Under the Mosaic dispensation no legal provision was made for the maintenance of widows. They were left dependent partly on the affection of relations, more especially of the eldest son, whose birthright, or extra share of the property, imposed such a duty upon him..."

The second is from **Baker's Evangelical Dictionary**:

"...The loss of a husband in ancient Israel was normally a social and economic tragedy. In a generally patriarchal culture, the death of a husband usually meant a type of cultural death as well... Her crisis was aggravated if she had no able-bodied children to help her work the land of her dead spouse. To provide for her children, to maintain the estate, and to continue payments on debts accrued by her husband imposed severe burdens. Since she was in an extremely vulnerable economic position, she became the prime target of exploitation. The fact that she was classed with the landless stranger and Levite indicates that she was often unable to keep her husband's land."

This poor widow's gift was of great value because she gave even though she was in great need herself.

This sentiment is echoed by Paul in **2 Corinthians 8 verses 1 to 4**:

"¹ And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people."

The message to us is that we are never too poor to give. We are never too deprived to help someone else.

There was another famous widow that we read about in **1 Kings 17 verses 9 to 16** -

(You will remember that this was just after Elijah had prophesied to King Ahab that there would be a great drought, and then God had said to him (Elijah) to go and hide in the Kerith Ravine where he (Elijah) was fed by Ravens and drank from the brook)

"⁷ Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. ⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him: ⁹ "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food."¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?"¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

¹² "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die."

¹³ Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land.'"

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. ¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah."

Even if we only have one scrap of food left we can still share what little we do have.

Let's face it most of us will, thankfully, never face such an appalling situation, even though most of us are facing financial difficulties of some kind or other.

This is a challenge to all of us - when we look at our circumstances do we think that we should give **more**, or **less**?

When the economic screw is tightened do we close our wallets up **tighter** or do we open them **wider**?

Through this encounter with the poor widow Jesus dares us to give, even when it hurts.

God values our gift most when we can least afford it.

In **verse 44** Jesus tells us that everyone else gave out of their abundance.

No matter the size of the gift it had less value to God.

God is not concerned about the size of our gifts - He cares more about the "size" of our faith.

The next thing that Jesus focuses on is the gift itself.

But notice what he says about it, in **verse 44b** - "*but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on*"

Out of necessity Jesus tells us what it was that she put in (*two very small copper coins, worth only a few pence.*)

In other translations they are referred to as "mites" which were actually, at the time, called "lepta".

They didn't make any smaller money. In fact the "lepta" was the smallest denomination coin made anywhere at any time in history!

Lepta were worth less than 1% of an agricultural worker's daily wages which to put into context today represents probably somewhere between 60 and 70 pence!

And that was **all** she had to live on!!

But Jesus was at pains to point out that after making the offering - she had **NOTHING** left.

The value of the gift is determined by God, not by how much is given but rather by how much is left.

This is contrary to what good common sense would suggest.

To a number of Christians tithing (that is giving 10 % of your income) is something that shows integrity but what must be clear to all is that to give 10% of your income is a much greater sacrifice for someone who earns £100 per week than it for someone who earns £1000 per week.

Jesus emphasizes that the widows gift was of greater value, not because of the amount **given** but because of the amount **kept (which was nothing)**. So when we are giving to God we must understand how much we are really giving not in the context of the gift but of how much we are keeping for ourselves.

Ultimately the one matter that comes out of Jesus encounter with this widow is that it is a triumph of faith over logic.

This widow's action can in no way be supported by any sort of reasonable argument.

Indeed if we were to be in a position where we knew her and knew that that was all she had we would, most probably, have advised her to keep it saying "God will understand"

She could even have given only one of the coins and kept the other but she didn't - she gave it all.

There are those who would say this act was foolish to the extreme and others who would commend her for her act of sacrificial giving but I suspect that she would say that it was done from an unshakable faith that God would supply her needs.

She believed in a merciful God, even though it was that same God who had allowed her husband to die and watched as she became destitute.

She believed that this same God would supply her needs, was worthy of praise, loved her and had a purpose for her life.

It's not the only time we read of this unshakeable faith in God.

Just look at Job, but instead of just a few verses there is a whole book that recounts his story. I suggest that you read it sometime soon.

So we can learn that -

Point 1 - What matters is not the size of our gift; it's the size of our faith.

and

Point 2 - It's not how much we GIVE; it's how much we KEEP

=====

Let's look now at another passage. It's still from Mark but a couple of chapters earlier. Chapter 10 in fact

Mark 10 verses 17 to 25

The Rich Young Man

¹⁷ As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. 'Good teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

¹⁸ 'Why do you call me good?' Jesus answered. 'No one is good - except God alone.'

¹⁹ You know the commandments: "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother."

²⁰ 'Teacher,' he declared, 'all these I have kept since I was a boy.'

²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'

²² At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³ Jesus looked round and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!'

²⁴ The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

~~²⁶ The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, 'Who then can be saved?'~~

~~²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.'~~

~~²⁸ Then Peter spoke up, 'We have left everything to follow you!'~~

~~²⁹ 'Truly I tell you,' Jesus replied, 'no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields - along with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.'~~

=====

Here we see an eager young man, very polite, very respectful, come and ask Jesus a very sensible question.

We can tell he was eager because he "ran" up to Jesus.

We can tell he was polite and respectful because he fell on his knees and addressed Jesus as "good teacher".

This kind of address was not typical for the time. A more respectful greeting may not be found in the entire Bible.

What else can we know about this young man?

Well it is clear that he believed in eternal life as that was the essence of his question so he could not have been a Sadducee.

He was, according to the version in Luke, a ruler. He was possibly a magistrate or some kind of Justice of the Peace.

No Roman ruler would have addressed Jesus as "teacher" so we can assume that this young man was a ruler in the local synagogue.

He may even have been one of the rich people at the temple mentioned in the story of the widow (just my speculation as it's not mentioned, but you never know???)

He was also very sensible because he knew that something had to be done in order to attain eternal life.

So, on the face of it, he had everything going for him.

So why then, at the conclusion of his time with Jesus, did he go away "sad"?

Well although the young man's original question to Jesus was about eternal life Jesus actually takes the opportunity to teach about money as well as salvation.

Jesus says to the young man, in response to his greeting "good teacher" ~~to remind him that~~ "no-one is good, except God alone".

This was not a denial of His own divinity; rather it was a case of Jesus seeing through the flattery and into the young man's heart which was simply self-centred.

The young man was trying to ingratiate himself with Jesus by means of:

- Falling on to his knees before Him,
- Complimenting Him,
- Giving Him credit for a divine characteristic he never really believed Jesus possessed.

When Jesus responded to the greeting "good teacher" by asking "why do you call Me good, no-one is good - except God alone" the young man ignored Him.

He probably realised that Jesus had seen through his hypocrisy.

The implications of the next couple of **verses (19 to 21)** could be considered confusing for Christians who are living under the New Covenant because Jesus seems to imply that in order to achieve eternal life, as well as giving up everything he had the young man also had to keep The Commandments!

Can this be so??

Well, yes, Jesus does indeed quote Commandments 5 to 10 and then the young man declares that he has kept all of these (since he was a boy). In response Jesus says that he lacks only **one** thing (in order to inherit eternal life - the young man's original question).

This seems to be saying that keeping those commandments is necessary in order to inherit eternal life.

But you will say that the commandments are Old Testament and therefore Old Covenant and we now live under the New Covenant that came through Jesus life, death on the cross and resurrection.

You would be correct.

However these commandments are reflected the New Testament writings of both John and Paul.

For example:

The sixth and ninth commandments (**commit murder** and bear **false witness**), are, decades later, described by the apostle John when he wrote in **Revelation 21 verse 8**:

*"⁸ But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the **murderers**, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and all **liars** - they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death."*

The seventh and eight commandments (**commit adultery** and **steal**), a long time after Jesus had established the New Covenant, are to be found in **1 Corinthians 6 verses 9 and 10**:

*"⁹ Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor **adulterers** nor men who have sex with men ¹⁰ nor **thieves** nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God".*

The fifth commandment (to honour your father and mother) is written in **Ephesians 6 verse 2:**

*" Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² **Honour your father and mother**'- which is the first commandment with a promise "*

So we see that under the new covenant, in order to inherit eternal life, one must not commit adultery, murder, steal or bear false witness, and we must honour our father and mother.

The apostle John and Paul certainly did not believe that what Jesus said to a man who desired eternal life under the Old Covenant was irrelevant to those who desire to obtain eternal life under the New Covenant.

Like the rich young man, if we "wish to enter into life," we too must, as it says in **Matthew 19 verse 17**

*"¹⁷ 'Why do you ask me about what is good?' Jesus replied. 'There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, **keep the commandments.**'"*

If we take into account what Jesus said about **lust** and **hatred** in His Sermon on the Mount, **Matthew 5 verses 27 and 28** -

*"²⁷ 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery."²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman **lustfully** has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*

And then **verses 43 and 44** -

*"⁴³ 'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and **hate** your enemy."⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,"*

We will be, most probably, guilty of breaking all of them.

So does this, then, rule us out from being candidates for eternal life?

No it most certainly does not, for we can be thankful that God is good and He extends grace to sinners giving time for repentance before meeting out the justice that is so thoroughly deserved.

And if that repentance is truly meant they are showered with mercy and are forgiven on the basis of Jesus sacrificial death on the cross.

So they are saved by grace.

However this extension of grace does not offer eternal life to those who continue to sin.

In **John 8 verse 11** Jesus says to the woman caught in adultery:

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

If we can understand this we can, without a doubt, bring into line the two concepts, namely what Jesus told the young man and what the Bible teaches us about salvation through grace.

Also it is apparent that the commandments that Jesus mentioned would have been sufficient, even if we consider the fact that one of the drawbacks of the commandments is the view that they were almost impossible to keep.

I say this because you will notice that Jesus, in **verse 21**, says to the young man *"one thing you lack"*.

Jesus said that then identified that one thing.

Jesus, when he was watching the widow put her offering in at the Temple could say *"but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on"*,

How did He know? Because He could see through the outer facade.

In the same way He could see through the young man's outer facade He knew what the young man lacked.

We can be sure that the young man was indeed keeping the commandments that Jesus mentioned (those forbidding murder, adultery, theft, dishonesty and so on) because otherwise Jesus would not have said *"one thing you lack"* with the emphasis on the *"one"*.

The one exception to the list is the commandment in **Mark 12 verse 31** where Jesus is talking to the teachers of the law and they ask Him about which is the most important of the commandments His response is:

"The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

The essence of this when He refers to "neighbour" is to mean the poor and needy which is something that is certainly prescribed throughout the Law of Moses and the Prophets.

It is this one thing that Jesus pointed out as being the **one thing** that the young man lacked.

Mind you the young man wasn't the only one that Jesus directed in this way.

In **Luke 12** when Jesus was talking to His disciples He says, in **verses 32 to 34**:

*"³² Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³ **Sell your possessions and give to the poor.** Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

So - what was it that was holding the young man back from doing what Jesus had said?

What was it that he was really trusting in?

After all there is nothing spiritually wrong in wealth.

There are many men in the Bible who were wealthy - great Godly men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job and David.

No there is nothing wrong with wealth - it's how you view your wealth.

That's where the problems come in.

In the developed world we live in a society that is driven by need and everyone is told that we need this or we need that.

- A bigger TV with the latest flat screen (now though the most modern TV has a curved screen).
- The latest model car, with all the gadgets.

- The newest fashion.

Most of the time most of the things that we are told that we need we didn't even realise we were missing.

You see where I'm coming from.

We need to be really on our toes if we are to keep a sense of proportion with all the advertising that we are bombarded with from all those newspapers, magazines and the TV.

It's a huge pressure.

You may not think so but it's not necessarily a blessing to have great wealth because with it comes great responsibility and it will (**not might**) put huge pressure on your spiritual lives.

The Christian walk is not easy for anyone, but it is particularly hard for the wealthy.

Or as Jesus put it in **verse 25 of Mark 10**:

²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

So what was Jesus talking about here?

Some theorize that the needle Jesus was speaking of was the Needle Gate, supposedly a low and narrow after-hours entrance found in the wall surrounding Jerusalem. This gate was designed in such a way that it could be used by pedestrians but not by marauding bandits on their camels. A camel could only go through it by stripping off any saddles or packs and crawling through on its knees.

The spiritual analogies were clear. The camel *could* go through the "Eye of the Needle," but only after being stripped of its baggage—its wealth!

The problem with this theory is there is no evidence such a gate ever existed. Beyond that, what sane camel driver would go through all that bother when larger gates were easily accessible?

So what can we get out of this encounter?

Point 1 - God looks at our heart, our true intentions.

And

Point 2 - God wants to see how much we are prepared to sacrifice in order to follow Him.

=====

When we compare the poor widow and the rich young man what do we see and what can we learn.

Well to begin with they were as different as you could get:

One was rich and successful; one was poor and definitely not successful.

One was young, one was old.

One was a man, one was a woman.

Probably the biggest difference is one that you can't see.

It's their attitude to what they had.

One was prepared to give away **everything**; the other was prepared to give away **nothing**.

I think that from what I have been saying this morning it wouldn't take a genius to see, from an eternal perspective, who received the greatest reward.

What sort of reward are you looking forward to?

=====

So what did the future hold for these two characters?

They don't appear anywhere else so nothing else is said about them so we can only speculate.

If you fast forward in your Bible to the **Book of Acts** at the end of **chapter 2**, talking about what happened at Pentecost, **verse 41** says:

"⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day"

Isn't it possible that the young man was one of those three thousand?

After all he had had time to fully come to understand what Jesus had said when they met, Jesus has been crucified and resurrected - the whole of Jerusalem must have known about it?

And then **verse 45** says:

"⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."

Isn't it possible that the young man was one of those who sold and the widow was one of those who received?

There's more about the believers sharing their possessions in **chapter 4 verses 32 to 35** which you can read later if you want to.

Further on at the beginning of **chapter 6** we see that widows were receiving a daily distribution of food.

Couldn't the widow be one of those who were blessed by this?

So don't you think that she was being blessed because of her earlier act of sacrificial giving?

I know that nothing is said to substantiate this, but there again there is nothing to say that it didn't.

So we can only speculate.

=====

So what of the future?

Well the descendants of the widow and the rich young man are still with us.

You don't have to look very far to see them.

The rich young men (and women now, but in essence they're the same really) who have made their millions from some technology based enterprise.

Some of the men are so young that they've still got spots and haven't started shaving yet.

But they have got money in abundance so they live in multi-million pound houses, have all the latest gadgets, cars clothes etc and go on extended holidays to the most exotic places you can imagine.

Then at the other end of the spectrum there are the bag ladies who carry all that they possess in a multitude of carrier bags and whose home is nothing more than a shop doorway. The nearest they get to a holiday is to spend time in a prison cell for some minor public order offence.

Although they probably wouldn't admit it those with more money than they know what to do with are missing something inside. When there is no one else around, when they are alone in their palatial surroundings, there is something that they lack.

A bit like the breakfast cereal advert that started with someone who has a hole where their stomach should be.

They are missing something inside.

Then there are those who have nothing, like the bag ladies of this world.

There is nothing more that they would like than to feel loved, have a sense of belonging, never to feel alone again.

There is someone who can answer those needs, who can fill those holes.

He observed the widow as she put her all into the offering.

The rich young man had a conversation with Him and, as it says in **Mark 10 verse 22**, *"He went away sad"*

His name is Jesus and if you don't already have a relationship with Him you can start now.

You don't have to get all dressed up, brush your hair and shine up your shoes.

It doesn't matter who you are, what sort of life you are leading, you can have a relationship with Jesus, starting now - today.

In **Matthew 7 verses 7 and 8** it says:

"⁷ 'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

You only have to ask Jesus into your life and the door to the Kingdom of Heaven will be open to you.

There you will find a warm welcome. Someone will give you a warm smile, a big hug and say *"Hello, I've been waiting for you"*

If you don't know Jesus then please seriously think about the implications of not having a relationship with Him. If you want to make that commitment and know the peace that this will bring right now then I am going to pray.

I will leave space for you to repeat what I am praying. So please everyone would keep your eyes closed and your heads bowed I will pray:

Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner.....

and I ask for Your forgiveness.

I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead.

I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life.

I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior.

In Your Name. Amen.....

If you prayed that prayer of commitment then please come and see me or one of the other leaders at the end.

If you just want further prayer or just want to talk about what you have heard this morning then please come and talk to me or anyone of the other leaders after the meeting has finished.

Thank You