

God's Invitation to Share
Malachi 3:8-12; Mark 12:38-44
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Malachi 3:8-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings!

You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me - the whole nation of you!

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

Mark 12:38-44 (The Message)

Jesus continued teaching. "Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end."

Sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins—a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, "The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all."

Often this passage is called “the widow’s mite” because the King James Version of the Bible says that the widow threw “two mites” into the treasury.

My favorite widow, my grandmother, talked about “the widow’s mite,” too. And she was not just my favorite widow; she was absolutely one of my very favorite people of all time. She showed me what unconditional love was. She showed her love with the best cheese grits in the history of the world. She made me feel more loved than anyone else ever has.

I remember a couple of different times the widow’s mite came up. Her church asked her to give toward some special need. Both times she seemed so surprised they were asking her of all people. She turned them down, and later told me “I mean, I give my widow’s mite, but I couldn’t possibly give what they were asking me.”

Maybe this was in the back of my mind when I chose this passage for today, Pledge Sunday. It seemed like a great stewardship text when I picked it out. Some people giving money, with some comments from Jesus. Seems perfect for stewardship, right?

Yes—perfectly risky! On Wednesday one of the women’s Bible study participants cornered me, and summed up why: “That widow was poor! She had nothing! Who thinks it’s smart to make someone give something she can’t afford to the church! That’s not right! And we’re supposed to do that too? That only makes me feel guilty!”

So this passage risks a stewardship sermon that does at least one of three things that I promise myself I’ll never do when asking people to give. I promise myself I’ll never guilt people into giving, or shame people into giving, or berate them into giving.

The passage has a pretty high degree of difficulty if I'm not going to do one of these three things, but I'm going to give it my best shot. Instead of guilting and berating and shaming, I'm going to focus on how Jesus affirms the widow for her giving. What could be better than Jesus affirming us for our giving? And that's what happens to her. He calls his disciples over and says,

The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all.

Can't you just see Jesus smiling over at her while he says this? If we can think about why he's smiling at her, then that will help us see why he might smile over at us for our giving. And that would be awesome—what could be better than Jesus smiling at us?

The first reason that Jesus smiles at her is that she is pretty generous, relative to how much money she had in the first place. She put in two small coins. Most of the commentators I read said that they would have been lepta, the smallest Roman coin available. Now this was 2000 years ago; what do you think these small coins would be worth today, taking into account inflation?

Turn to someone and guess.

Well they were worth $1/64^{\text{th}}$ of a normal day's pay. The minimum wage in IL is \$8.25/hour, so an 8 hour day means \$66 is a normal day's pay. $1/64^{\text{th}}$ of that is \$1.03 for each coin; two coins would be \$2.06. Did anyone guess close to that?

Jesus says "she gave her all." I have a feeling that \$2.06 being "her all" is a bit of an exaggeration, like when Jesus says the mustard tree is the greatest of all shrubs or when he says that if our eye causes us to sin we

should gouge it out. My sense is that her \$2.06 donation was not all the money that she had, but it was enough money that it made a big difference to her. Her generosity made a difference in how she planned the rest of her expenses. It wasn't the last thing on her list; it was one of her very top priorities.

And Jesus loved that it was one of her top priorities! Loved it enough to gather the disciples together to draw their attention to it. And loved it enough that Mark made sure it made it into his Gospel.

Contrast it with the wealthier folks who were “making larger contributions.” Jesus said that they'll never miss what they gave. I'm sure Jesus was glad about their gifts, but doesn't call the disciples over to tell them how psyched he is about these gifts which aren't as significant to them as the \$2.06 was to the widow.

I think another reason that Jesus smiled over at her is that she let her faith penetrate her whole life—including her pocketbook. She knew that faith means giving over every part of herself to God.

Not so the religious scholars that Jesus berates earlier in the passage. They love to preen around in public flattery, basking in their prominent positions, sitting at the head table—all while they exploit the weak and the helpless, as if that part of their lives is off limits to God.

There is something about letting God have access to your whole life that Jesus likes. The widow did it. The religious scholars didn't.

And as much as I hate to say it, my grandmother didn't as much as she could, either. There was a reason that her church asked her for money when there was a special need. She lived in one of the nicest houses in town. She and my grandfather were always financially secure. After my dad started taking care of her finances and she moved into a retirement

center a lot like Lake Forest Place, she would often say, “I sure hope my money lasts longer than I do.” Dad would look up from her checkbook and say, “Mother, at this rate you could live until the year 2167 without any problems.”

Grammy lived out her faith in all sorts of ways. As I said, she covered me with unconditional love. She displayed the fruits of the Spirit in every interaction. She loved reading the Bible and her prayer life was rich.

And Jesus smiled at her for all these things. But I wish that he had had the chance to smile at her for her giving being more in line with her heart. She could have given much more than what she called her “widow’s mite,” but for some reason she resisted turning this part of her life over to him. And in this one area, I bet she didn’t get to hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

One last reason why Jesus smiled over at the widow. She gave what she could. \$2.06. So he is smiling about her heart and her generosity, and NOT about the actual amount she gave. Others gave a lot more, but he didn’t draw attention to *their* gift. The amount didn’t really matter. Jesus wasn’t trying to build the temple budget. He was trying to build hearts who put their money where their faith was.

It’s awfully risky for me to say this on Pledge Sunday, but I’m an interim pastor, so I’m going to take a chance. It doesn’t make any difference to me what the specific amount you pledge is, either. For one thing, I’ll never see the pledging data. But much more importantly, I’m a lot more interested in Jesus smiling at each one of you than I am in simply building the church budget.

I remember at the church I served in Bloomington two families that I’m very sure Jesus smiled over. The first was a couple about my age. They had four kids who were approaching college. They owned a small

business, so their income fluctuated a lot each year. They had made a capital campaign pledge one year when their business was really strong. Then it took a nosedive. They decided they would be faithful to their pledge. That year they gave a third of their income to the church. I'm certain Jesus was smiling at their hard work to be so generous.

The other person that Jesus smiled over was a sixth grader that I'll call James. James listened to me talk about giving in worship and he decided he wanted to give his quarter collection to the stewardship drive. So the next Wednesday during the children's program James brought me one of those cardboard cut-out stands with fifty quarters, one for each state. He'd been collecting it for a few years. His mom said he treasured it. And James decided to give it to God.

It was only \$12.50. Not much more than the widow's \$2.06. Just like with the widow, I have a feeling Jesus was calling everyone around him in heaven to tell them to check out James' incredible generosity.

Today on pledge Sunday, and throughout the year to come, we all have the chance for Jesus to smile at our giving. Maybe you've come in here with your pledge card already filled out, or maybe you've even already turned in your pledge card. Maybe you read the stewardship committee's letter that hopes for a two percent increase in the annual budget.

Instead of just thinking about a two percent increase, or about what you have given in the past, I hope you'll consider what kind of gift will lead Jesus to smile at you the way he did the widow.

What would be a pledge that would lead you to reorient your other expenses, like the widow's gift did? What kind of giving would give God access to this part of your life, too?

As you think about what kind of pledge will lead Jesus to smile at you, I hope you'll consider changing your pledge. Even if you already turned in your card, you could always turn in another to change it.

I told you I wouldn't guilt you into a pledge, or shame you into a pledge, or berate you into a pledge.

But I'm not going to miss the chance to invite you into a pledge that will lead Jesus to smile you as you give all of next year. After all, what could be better than that?