

Mark 12:41-44 (1984 NIV) ***A Lesson in God-Pleasing Giving***

Introduction

Today, we have many opportunities to give because of the resources we have and the many needs before us. The big question is this—in our giving, are we doing it in a God-pleasing manner?

Years ago, a friend of mine was preparing to go to Saudi Arabia to work as a port officer. The money was good and there was no personal income taxation. So, he didn't want to miss the opportunity. But he had a problem—the Saudis would only accept him if he officially declared himself belonging to a religion. But he was not a follower of any religion.

So, he went to a certain temple, gave a generous donation, and was issued a document that certified him as a donation member of that temple. In a sense, his giving was not really a spiritual encounter with God, but a business transaction whereby he “bought” a certificate that eventually secured for him a job in Saudi Arabia.

Yes, in all our giving today, are we doing it in a God-pleasing manner?

As we run through the whole of Mark 12, we will see that even though Jesus was often talking with the religious teachers and leaders, He was always using these occasions to teach His disciples. In fact, we can really feel the impact of what Jesus was teaching in Mark 12:41-44 when we contrast it with what Jesus said earlier in 12:38-40.

I believe this is a strategy adopted by Mark when he wrote his gospel. In Mark 12:38-40, Mark tells us how the “teachers of the Law”—people who were representatives of the highest piety and spirituality in Judaism at that time—failed miserably before the Lord. Why so? It's because:

- “they like to walk around ...”
- “they like to be greeted ...”
- “they have the most important seats ...”
- “they have the places of honor ...”
- “(they) for a show make lengthy prayers ...”
- “they devour widow's houses ...”
 - Now, this is really surprising because the Jewish Law actually gives a great emphasis in protecting the welfare of two groups of people in Jewish society—the widows and the orphans.
 - These teachers of the Law should know this better than anyone else, and they should have observed this more zealously than anyone else.
 - But ... “they devour widow's houses”—they take advantage of widows instead of protecting them.

In short, they made a big show of their giving because they were pretentious (masking up themselves) and ostentatious (showing off themselves). And Jesus was here telling His disciples not to be like these “teachers of the Law” though they were commonly esteemed by the people then as models of piety and spirituality.

Instead, Jesus used a teaching moment to point His disciples to another model of piety and spirituality in 12:41-44 (our text today). He pointed to a particular person and said to His disciples, “If you really want to please God rather than to please people in your giving, don’t be like the religious teachers and leaders. Rather, be like this person.”

Let us now read Mark 12:41-44, and learn a lesson on God-pleasing giving in our faith life.

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 fraction of a penny. 43 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. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

I. Big Idea: God-pleasing giving is to give with generosity, humility, and trust in God (vv. 41-44).

Allow me to ask you to use your sanctified imagination a bit. I want to dramatize a little as I expound on what happened in Mark 12:41-44.

- Jesus went people-watching on that day with His disciples. He came near the temple in Jerusalem and sat Himself down at a spot opposite where the offerings were made in the temple treasury. The collection box placed there was for the compulsory temple tax as well as the freewill offerings.
- Jesus was actually sitting at a vantage point and looking at the crowd making their way into the temple. The area through which they were entering the temple was probably the Court of Women, where both Israelite women and men were allowed access. As the line of worshippers filtered through, they dropped their offering into the collection box.
- And there was this man, all dressed up in expensive silk. Holding up a big bag full of coins, he began to pour out a quarter of these into the collection box. There was a long and loud clinking of heavy coins. Just in case this long and loud clinking of coins failed to arouse the attention of people around, this well-dressed man said proudly in a loud voice—“Sorry to hold back the queue. But you know, it takes time to empty some 1,000 gold coins.”
- After this man came another man who looked even more ostentatious than the first—he wore a diamond grafted waist-belt that sparkled with dazzling extravagance. He too had a bag of similar size that was full of coins. He poured about half of the contents into the box, and he held up the queue even longer.

Then turning to the people around in pretended apology, he said—"I hate to delay you folks. How I wish emptying some 2,000 gold coins can take much less time."

- Just when everyone was expecting the next show of big giving, a widow appeared, frail and poor-looking. She lived quite far away and had walked her way to the temple. She was perspiring profusely when she reached the temple ground.
 - When the crowd saw her, they asked in quiet doubt, "Can this frail and poor-looking woman bring this contest of big giving to a climax by pouring in 3,000 gold coins?"
 - As the crowd waited for the answer, this woman dug her hand laboriously into her little money bag and what came out in her hand were not gold coins, but only two small copper coins—the lightest and least valuable of all coins during that period. She then gingerly dropped these two copper coins into the box, and then continued her way into the temple without any fanfare or boastful speech.
 - The crowd was disappointed at this anti-climax, but the audible applause of one man for this widow could be heard. This man was the Lord Jesus Himself, and He declared this widow as the winner in this contest of giving to God. Others might have judged differently as to who the winner was, but it's the Lord's verdict that mattered on that day.

When the poor widow gave of her two copper coins, she was not competing with the "many rich people" mentioned in this episode. She was really committing herself to worship God and advance His work with her giving.

As we continue with our text today, we see Jesus using the widow as an example to challenge His disciples.

- So calling His disciples around Him, Jesus told them—"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 that she had to live on."
- The Lord was telling His disciples that this widow had actually out-given the rest of them. But we wonder if Jesus had made a misjudgement here—what's so big about two small copper coins? However, Jesus stressed that He was telling the truth; that He didn't make a mistake or tell a lie. But what did Jesus actually mean when He said that the widow had put in more than all the others?
- I believe Jesus was commending the widow not so much in terms of the amount of her giving, but the attitude of her giving. Jesus wanted to highlight the exemplary attitude in her giving, not the extreme action in her giving.
 - Yes, the rich people had given much in terms of quantity or amount. But they gave to boast of their abundance. Their remaining wealth after their giving made them continue to trust in their abundance, not in God. Their attitude is that of giving with hypocrisy, showmanship, and trust in wealth and not in God.

- Conversely, the poor widow gave her two small copper coins; all she had to live on. Her attitude is that of giving with generosity, humility, and trust in God to provide for her every need.
- I want to stress again that Jesus wants us here to take note of the widow's exemplary attitude, and not so much her extreme action. Jesus is not prescribing the seemingly extreme giving of the widow as normative action for us today. Jesus wants us to note that the widow's giving is exemplary because ...
 - She gave humbly her two small copper coins, yet generously because these were all she had. She trusted God to provide for her needs, demonstrating faith and dependence on Him.
 - But let me stress this—God does not want us to give such that we end up being irresponsible in taking care of the well-being of ourselves and our loved ones. Rather, God wants us to release (not renounce) our resources (material or otherwise) generously and humbly as and when appropriate, yet wisely and responsibly.
 - Yes, God owns everything we have; God wants us to give to Him and His work generously and humbly. At the same time, God often allows us to wisely and responsibly keep some things for the well-being of ourselves and our loved ones.
 - Indeed, we give not so much to empty ourselves of earthly wealth, but to empty our all-reliance on earthly wealth and trust in God's never failing provision.
- The rich people in our text today gave big out of their abundance—they were ostentatious, but not exemplary in their giving. The quantity of their giving might be huge, but the quality of their giving was not pleasing to the Lord. The poor widow gave small, but it was all that she had—she was not ostentatious, but she was exemplary in her giving. The quantity of her giving might be humble, but the quality of her giving was pleasing to the Lord. That's why Jesus declared her the winner on that day at the temple.

We are also called to give not like the rich people in our text today, but like the poor widow. God-pleasing giving is to give with generosity, humility, and trust in God. What then are some specific applications to consider today?

II. Application #1: Give by first checking the condition of our heart, not the cash in our wallet.

One reason why many Christians have reservation in giving is because they don't believe that they have much to offer. They feel that they are lacking so much that it is not worthwhile to give what they have. We fall straight into the devil's lie when we say to ourselves, "I have nothing much to give. My contribution will not amount to much or make much difference. So, I might as well not give."

My mind goes back to the young lad in Mark 6:30-44 when Jesus was intending to feed at least 5,000 hungry people before Him.

- What if the young lad had said, “Gosh, look at the crowd! I have only five loaves and two fish. Surely, this is insufficient to feed such a massive crowd.”
- But this lad didn’t. Instead, he stepped forward and offered the little he had.
- And the Lord did His part with the little that this lad brought to Him—all the people had their fill, and there were even 12 basketfuls of leftovers.

It is not about the little we have, but how much more the Lord can do even with the little we give. Indeed, our giving is not so much to compete with others, but to commit to God because we believe that little becomes much when put into His hand. Indeed, no amount is too insignificant to God if it is given as an act of gratitude, worship, and participation in His work.

The older we are, the more prudent we become because we tend to weigh things more carefully. This is being wise and responsible except that when we overdo it, it can work negatively in our faith living and giving. We reason, “I better not commit myself because my little contribution is really not worth much.”

Perhaps, the Lord is challenging you and me to give our “two copper coins” like the poor widow, or our “five loaves and two fish” like the young lad. He is calling us to give our “nothing much” to Him and have faith that He can multiply its effectiveness beyond our imagination; to realise that our little can become and do much when we put it in the Lord’s all-sufficient hand.

The rich people gave out of the wealth in their wallet rather than out of the worship in their heart. Jesus saw through their hypocrisy, showmanship, and their lack of trust in God. The poor widow gave out of the worship of God in her heart. Jesus looked into her heart and praised her for her generosity, humility, and trust in God as her provider.

Indeed, God-pleasing giving is to first check the condition of our heart, not the cash in our wallet. And this also applies to the giving of our other resources (e.g. our time and expertise), even if these may seem to matter little in our own estimation.

III. Application #2: Give not to recklessly renounce our wealth, but to responsibly release our wealth for the worship and work of God.

We Christians have no difficulty in acknowledging that Jesus is our Saviour. But to honestly profess Jesus as Lord may need some serious self-examination. This is because the Lordship of Jesus Christ requires us to allow Him to be Lord over every sphere of our life—our private life, our home life, our work life, our church life, and our social life. There is a tendency on our part to go to one extreme at the expense of the other life responsibilities. E.g. we may feel very spiritual when we say, “I am planning to top-up what I have already given to the church mission fund with my year-end bonus.” Conversely, we may somehow feel less spiritual when we say, “I am planning to use my year-end bonus for a family-bonding holiday because I realise that I have neglected my family members for quite a while.” We think that as far as God is concerned, caring for our church will always have higher priority over caring for our family. So, we carry this fallacious belief that God is saying to us, “Love your church,

hate your family; nurture your church, neglect your family.” And we forget that God is really God in every sphere of our life—our private life, our home life, our work life, our church life, and our social life.

- As we grow older in our faith, are we still in step with God concerning how we manage the many responsibilities we have in life?
- Are we managing these according to God’s priorities for us, or according to our own whims and fancies?

It is without doubt that we need wealth (material or otherwise) to enable us to carry out our many responsibilities well in life. God blesses us with such wealth not for it to be our master, but to be our servant. We use it to honour God and help others; we also use it for wise and responsible self-care (not selfish care) and to care for our loved ones.

Jesus refuted and rebuked the religious leaders of His time for their pseudo piety with these words in Mark 7:11-13—“But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

- Honouring God as the Giver of all things with our wealth is pleasing to Him.
- Helping to meet the needs of others with our wealth is pleasing to Him.
- Caring for myself as a person created and loved by God is pleasing to Him.
- Caring for family as my God-given responsibility is pleasing to Him.

As God blesses us, we do not keep all only for our personal and family good, ignoring giving to honour God and help others in need. At the same time, as God blesses us, we do not give all we have to honour God and help others, thereby causing undue hardship to our own self and loved ones. This is the balance we need to learn if we are to keep and give in a God-pleasing manner.

Here is a case study documented by neuroscientist Dr. Leonardo Fontenelle, and widely cited in the field of neuroscience research.

In 1990, a quiet Brazilian man named Raoao suffered a serious health crisis. He was only 49 years old. But he pulled through the crisis, and afterward, he told people he wanted to live differently. “I saw death from up close,” he said. “Now I want to be in high spirits.”

So Raoao quit his job in human resources at an insurance company in Rio de Janeiro. Instead, he began selling French fries from a street cart. The fries quickly proved popular in his neighbourhood. Raoao would often give them away for free.

And what money Raoao did make, he often gave away to children begging in the street. Or he would use his profits to buy them candy. Day after day he came home without any money in his pocket. But he couldn't have been happier. Indeed, nothing made him happier than giving—whether from his savings or the French-fry money.

All this sounds good, until it was discovered that the “health crisis” that changed his life was actually a stroke that left him with severe brain damage. In other words, he became “pathologically generous”; compulsively driven to give.

Before his stroke, Raoao was very frugal and hiding away much of his money. But afterward, he gave, gave, and gave without any thought of the consequences. To those who didn't know him, he seemed like a saint.

But those who did know him felt differently. Raoao didn't own the French-fry cart by himself. His brother-in-law owned half, and was alarmed to see all his profits disappearing. The two got into big fights about this.

In fact, Raoao eventually gave away so many that the cart business went bankrupt. His giving also caused financial hardship to his family. His son and wife had to borrow money just to live and almost lost their home. And whenever street children approached him and asked for money, Raoao could not help but reach for his wallet. It was more or less an automatic reflex. No matter how low Raoao's bank account ran; no matter how many times his family yelled at him, his behaviour didn't change.

Raoao died in 1999 of kidney failure. But he died happy because of his years of generous giving. In fact, his neurologist commented that the person he knew who died as the happiest man was none other than Raoao.

(<https://www.sciencehistory.org/stories/disappearing-pod/when-generosity-turns-pathological>)

Now, I am not telling this story to say that those who give generously all the time are suffering from brain damage. I am telling this rather unusual story to highlight that giving generously, humbly, and with trust in God to provide is pleasing to God, BUT bringing undue hardship to ourselves and our loved ones as a result is not wise and responsible giving in God's sight.

Again, let me here reiterate what I have said earlier—Jesus wants us to imitate the exemplary attitude of the poor widow in her giving, not the extreme action in her giving. Jesus was contrasting the attitude of the rich people who gave out of their prosperity with that of the poor widow who gave out of her poverty, and not so much their respective amounts.

We worship God as the One who blesses us with our resources, as well as the Lord over every sphere of our life. This implies that to give our BEST to God in one sphere

of life does not necessarily mean we give our EVERYTHING to that one thing, leaving NOTHING to our other God-given responsibilities in life.

As the Lord blesses us, we do not recklessly renounce our resources (material or otherwise), and dispose them away mindlessly. Rather, we are to responsibly release these resources, and dispense them mindfully as our worship of God and participation in His work in all spheres of life.

Conclusion

Giving that is pleasing to God is to give with generosity, humility, and trust in Him as our provider. We can do this by:

- First, checking the condition of our heart, not the cash in our wallet.
- Second, reminding ourselves not to recklessly renounce our resources (big or small; material or otherwise), but to responsibly release them for the worship of God and His work in and through us.

Let's seek the Lord, who calls us to give to Him and His work, to enable and empower us to be faithful in doing so. Amen!